THE NOVELS OF FRANK SWINNERTON

THE HAPPY FAMILY
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE CHASTE WIFE
SHOPS AND HOUSES
NOCTURNE
SEPTEMBER

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GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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FRANK SWINNERTON

AUTHOR OF "SHOPS AND HOUSES,"
"NOCTURNE," ETC.

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BOOK ONE: CHERRY

CHAPTER I: THE CIGARETTES

i

THE village of Hippeswell lies well in the middle of Suffolk, remote from any large town, and sharing the peace of the district with perhaps a dozen other villages of similar size. It consists of only one long street of houses, most of them cottages, with a few of larger size; and it contains perhaps eight or nine hundred people. Apart from the village, the biggest houses in the immediate neighbourhood of Hippeswell are at some distance, and one or two of them are as much as a couple of miles from the railway station. It was in one of these larger houses that the Howard Forsters lived, in the days before the war; and the Howard Forsters were among the most well-to-do families in Hippeswell. They were childless, and Forster had bought Dene House fourteen or fifteen years before this story opens. He had always been a man of means, but he was also a partner (not a very active partner) in a large firm of shipbrokers, so that he was, at the age of nearly fifty, an extremely prosperous landowner, who preferred to lease his farms rather than to work any of them for himself, and who led the life of a man of leisure.

Forster's wife was a number of years younger than her husband. While Howard spent several days in each month, and sometimes of each week, in town, his wife stayed throughout the summer at Dene House. In the autumn they both migrated to London, where they had a flat, and where they were able to enjoy in a rather sub-

dued way the satisfactions of the city's winter gaieties. Howard, perhaps, enjoyed these gaieties more than his wife, for he was a clubman and a *viveur,* while his wife was too young to be matronly and to enjoy the company of the inert, and not quite young enough to be a married hoyden and to frequent the society of the scatterbrained. Moreover she had no taste for smart life, because she had originally come from a family less rich than her husband's, and because, while she was an only daughter, she had not had opportunities as a girl for cultivating the restlessness of spirit without which smart life has no enticements. She was, that is to say, neither neurotic nor thoughtlessly eager for stimulant.

The two had been married for fifteen years. In Hippeswell they were known to all and were generally liked. In the houses within a radius of ten miles they also had friends and a moderate amount of social interchange with people with whom more intimate acquaintance would have been a bore. But the life they led had tended to encourage Howard in bucolic and athletic pleasures which absorbed his attention without producing other qualities than the purely muscular, while his wife had become thoughtful and humane and observant of human nature to an extent that sometimes made people rather ashamed in her company of their own silliness and passion for excitement.

ii

It was already evening, and Marian Forster knew that in a few moments she must go and dress for dinner. From the drawing-room of her husband's house she could see across the wide stretch of lawns into a distance of flat Suffolk country. There, directly to the east, she could imagine the shallow waters of the North Sea; above her was the moon, hardly more than a week old—a maiden

moon waxing ever larger and more bright. It was summer, and the birds were squabbling like happy children in the noble trees that lay to north and south of the house. An inexhaustible stillness lay upon the house and upon the country, which was slipping gently into coolness after the vehement heat of the late June sunshine. Marian lingered, seriously watching that prospect of still green, but in no sense aware of it. Her thoughts were busy. She was in a dream.

Marian herself was a rather tall woman, fair and candid, her eyes serious, her brow rounded, her chin firm and beautiful. She carried herself with dignity, but without hauteur; her hands were still the slim hands of youth, but all her movements were deliberate and controlled. She looked less than her age, which was thirty-eight. In her expression there was neither sorrow nor contentment, for Marian had long ago found in her day's work full occupation for her mind, and if she ever had regrets they were never seen by others. She was extraordinarily reserved, completely, it seemed, mistress of herself in every emergency. She had neither children nor relatives. Apart from her husband, she had no intimate ties, and although she had those whom she called friends they were alike in finding her so uncommunicative as to remain almost thrillingly mysterious to them all. It was a burden to the more impulsive and garrulous among these friends that Marian had no complaints to make of life. She did not even complain of her husband, which is a very favourite form of egotism in married women. It was unnatural, they felt. It made them feel subtly inferior to her. Yet they all liked her, and were conscious of her magnetism, and wished that they resembled her in self-control and in beauty. Young girls told her their secrets—such poor little secrets as a rule,—and women told her the truth about things they generally

misrepresented in confidence. This was an unconscious testimony to Marian's wisdom; it was a proof of her strength that those who had been so honest did not afterwards dislike her. They did not even say "I don't know why I should tell you all this": they ardently bored her as if to do that were the most natural thing in their unreal lives.

Only to herself, in solitude, did Marian sometimes say: "My God! What rubbish it all is! And what a fool I am to listen to it!"

She did not say this before her husband, who often confided to her the secrets of his past misadventures. He, sublime egoist, found her still the most sympathetic woman in the world. He was denied the neurotic satisfaction—so delightful to the self-engrossed and self-indulgent—of feeling misunderstood and estranged by his wife.

iii

The sharp click of a closing door indicated that Howard Forster was in the room. Marian turned quickly. He was in tweeds, evidently just returned from his before-dinner walk, a little flushed, rather worn with good living and the exhaustion of tissue due to a strenuous life of self-indulgence.

"Already?" Marian said. "Is it as late as that?"

"Very nearly," came the dry reply. "Very nearly as late as that. But not quite."

"I must hurry." There was no haste in her movement, but she was quite decided. "Have you had a good walk?"

Howard grunted, pulling down his waistcoat. Tall as was Marian, he was a couple of inches taller, and very broad. The breadth which in youth had attracted her as a sign of manhood was increased to something more than

a suggestion of well-covered bones. His face was red and his hair thin. He had eaten and drunk too readily all his life to remain the fine figure of his young manhood. Yet he was still handsome, still capable of attracting women who were magnetised by his air of animal strength. Moreover his tongue was still supple. He was one of those men who can always exert mental ingenuity to capture the attention of responsive females; his success in former encounters gave him a readiness in move and counter-move that counter-balanced the effect of his obvious decay. His laugh was sudden and infectious, and the air he had of withholding secrets was fascinating to all those whose brains were as shallow as their intuitions. They puzzled over him, mystified and speculative, a condition which was an essential preliminary to the myth-making of love. Only to Marian was it known that the secrets he withheld were oddly free from importance, but that was because Marian had mastered the secrets early and now marvelled that they should ever have been secrets at all. She knew him thoroughly, and, which was clever of her, she did not despise him. It would never have done to drive him to a genuine secrecy, because such a suppression would without fail have become a vicious clot in his system. So Marian knew him and remained his true wife, a rôle which was that of mother and confidante. Howard respected her. He knew his own inferiority, but he still cherished the belief that she did not know it; and this in itself was a testimony to her wisdom as well as to her self-control.

They stood looking at one another in passing. Marian's eyes frank and observant, his ironic and shrewd. As she was going, he caught her hand for an instant, smiling down at her, unable to help himself. It was for an instant only, and she was immediately after gone from the room.

iv

Her own bedroom was upon the first floor of the house. It was large and bare, with a polished floor and light-coloured rugs. Her bed was of dark oak, a beautiful wood, and the other furnishings were in the same style. The hangings and the counterpane of her bed were uniform, fresh blue and green and red. The room gave evidence of a very decided personality. It was a personality loving light and order; but the room lacked intimacy, as though Marian carried her natural reserve even into her personal surroundings. It was a room for retirement and for peace; but it had not the freakishness that goes with a charming and nonsensical spirit of disorder. Her evening-dress lay upon the bed, a beautiful dress of grey and lemon-colour which she alone could have worn without incongruity. Everything in the room, apart from the gay hangings, was in pure colour, Quakerish in sobriety, and without admixture. Everything was refined, cold, fresh.

It was not long before Marian was dressed. A few minutes later, the gong sounded and she slowly went down the wide, white-margined staircase, pausing to glance out at the garden in that ravishing dusk, and then awaiting her husband in the drawing-room. He was a little late; but he came back into the room looking pink and vigorously groomed after a bath that seemed to have embraced his hair, so moistened and flatly brushed did that remnant shine above his bucolic face.

"Now, my dear!" cried Howard, with impetuosity. He moved about the room with the plunging gait of a stout man. He still had an air of irresistible energy and bonhomie, the air he had preserved throughout life, but matured and developed almost into a bedside manner. He clapped his hands together and held open the door,

and they passed side by side through the doorway and across the open hall. In the dining-room the parlour-maid stood waiting, very staid and demure, as though she were altogether without personal reality, but was formed only to obey. They moved to their seats in silence, for nowadays when the Forsters dined alone they seemed never to have anything to say to each other. It was a typical middle-aged and childless menage. How different it had been fifteen years ago! But Marian flinched a little at the recollection of that time. She flinched always when she thought of her old adoring love, of the summer evening, in twilight, when somebody else had been playing Chopin's music until her heart seemed full of tears, and Howard had drawn all that emotion into love for himself with a rapturous ardour long sacred in her memory. Now Marian wondered. She had been so young then, and so easily moved; and love had been so precious to her. She recalled the enchanted days with sadness. Young girls do not care for reserved wooers: Howard, eager, all fire and persuasiveness, had answered her dream as no other man could have done. On her side it had been love—the ingenuous blossoming of a girl's idealism; and when that had faded she was a wife only half-awakened, still shyly fearing to analyse her emotions. It had been for later days to show that in a life-partnership there are other beauties of comradeship than those of passing joy and excitement. But she had never loved another man. Her heart had hardened a little, or it had found in compassion a way of escape from brooding regret. That was why she could with equanimity continue to share Howard's home and to observe him across the table with such affectionate unconcern.

V

Howard paused in eating his fish and drank some claret, looking at her afterwards with a sharp expression over the top of his raised napkin. He had an air of singular preoccupation. Evidently some care unknown to her was oppressing him.

"I must go up to town to-morrow," he said. "I shall stay at the club. There's nobody at the flat, is there?"

Marian shook her head. Was he anxious about some business trouble? She answered as though no such problem had occurred to her.

"No. Edith's here. I didn't think we should be going up for some weeks."

"Business. I must go. It'll be all right." He pursed his lips and frowned in what she took to be a good-humoured sense of business importance. He was such a child still! He still did not discuss business with her! "I shall be back by Thursday, I expect."

"Yes. I've got Miss Templeton coming to dinner to-morrow."

"Thank God I shall miss her," said Howard, quietly. Nevertheless he was frowning with preoccupation. Marian reproved him by a side glance at Blanche, who, standing by the sideboard, was listening to all they said.

"And the Sinclairs on Wednesday."

"The Sinclairs?" He grunted. "Didn't know they were about."

"They've got a young nephew staying with them. They're bringing him."

"Excellent." There was an air of dryness in Howard's speech. "Then you won't be lonely. How old's the boy?"

"I don't gather. Mrs. Sinclair says he's a charming boy. But nowadays that may mean almost anything, from twelve to thirty. He can't be very old."

Howard thought.

"Old Sinclair must be getting on for sixty. I'm getting on for sixty myself."

"I always forget," Marian remarked, "whether you're over or under fifty."

They both smiled, Howard with a faint irritation; because they both knew he was only forty-nine. It was an occasional fad with him to pretend to great age and good preservation.

"Of course," Howard went on, giving her only half his attention, "they've been married a good many years."

"But you'd think that wouldn't matter as the boy's a nephew." Marian brought him back to a degree of relationship which he seemed inclined to ignore. Howard gave a grim smile.

"Well, you'll see on Wednesday, won't you," he suggested. "All this speculation's like the twisting of an envelope . . . Anybody else?"

"Nobody else before you come back. Do you expect to see the Mants while you're in town?" Marian was not looking at Howard as she spoke, and so his hesitation at her remark passed unnoticed. She heard him say, in a moment:

"I doubt it."

"If you do," she pursued innocently, "ask them when they're coming down here. They all like tennis, and Robert will be glad of the practice."

"Robert? Oh, yes, that's the schoolboy . . ." Howard rather impatiently gave his plate a slight push. "No, no," he added to Blanche, who offered him more fish. "I don't expect Tom Mant could get away. Or Alice, either."

Marian was letting the subject drop, when she added a supplement.

"No. But it would be nice to have Cherry and Robert for a few days. However, just as you like. Probably you won't see them. I suppose Cherry's about twenty-two now. I haven't seen her for a long time. Goodness, it *is* a long time! It must be two or three years since I met her with Alice; and then it was just for a minute. You've seen them all fairly lately . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Howard. Marian for the first time noticed his suppressed irascibility, and the Mants disappeared from the conversation with discretion. She thought no more about them, although the schoolboy, Robert, was a favourite of hers, and she was always glad to have him in the house during the long sleepy summer months. Instead of talking, she went on with her dinner, and her mind escaped back to the day upon which she had last met Cherry.

vi

Blanche had brought the coffee, and had returned to the kitchen. The Forsters sat apparently dreaming, with the electric lights turned up but the blinds undrawn. Behind the dark still trees the evening sky was luminously pale. There seemed to be no breeeze at all, and the birds were becoming less noisy as the shadow settled upon the garden.

Howard had leaned forward mechanically to the cigarette-box, and was groping in it. With a jerk he tilted the box up.

"Damn that girl!" he said. "No cigarettes in the box!" It was almost an explosive cry, and he half rose from his chair to go to the bell. There was a little wave of irritation between them at such grotesque annoyance over a trivial thing. Marian quickly pushed her

own box of mother-of-pearl across the table towards him.

"Have one of mine," she said. "I think you'll like them."

Howard, recovering himself at the sound of her persuasive voice, grinned as he reached his big hand forward and gripped the box.

"What are they?" he demanded. "Two-toed-twins?"

Marian looked at him, surprised at an unfamiliar allusion; and Howard struck a match very quickly, so that his face was illuminated and she saw only his eyes glistening in the sudden ray. For a moment Marian thought nothing. Then, irresistibly, there came into her mind the intuitive knowledge: That's a joke he has with another woman. She slowly rose from the table, the thought having no sequel; and went to the door. Later, she wondered whether his visit to London had been explained. Also his impatience, and a perceptible restlessness during the preceding days which had considerably puzzled her.

CHAPTER II: NIGEL SINCLAIR

i

OFTEN during the two days she stopped in her work —it was not physically strenuous—and fidgetted. At such times a small perpendicular crease came into her naturally open brow, and her eyes darkened. She did not become flustered or aggrieved. But she was a little resentful. It seemed so hard that Howard could not yet stay his fancies, because in the old days she had filled his life with such ardent love that any lighter feeling, coming now, after so many episodes of a peculiar nature, was a betrayal of persistent animal stupidity. He had learnt nothing. He never would learn anything. He was incorrigible; and however charming perversity may be in the young it grows indecent with the attainment of middle-age. So Marian sighed at her husband's prolonged adolescence, feeling sure that her original thought had been a true one. So many minor evidences came into her mind subsequently—little intangible things which she had not noticed at the time—and gave substance to her conviction. He had been kind, awkward, even boisterous; he had gone walking beyond his usual habit. He had been restless, suddenly irritable, and then apologetic. Had he written or received letters? If she had known that, she would have been clearer. And what sort of woman was it this time? That was where the humiliation came: Marian was aware that Howard had no great judgment in the matter of character. If the woman were good she would suffer; if she were not good she would

find him as treacherous as any other light lover. If Marian had loved him any longer she would have shrunk from such a thought; but she no longer loved Howard, and that was why she could see this case as one of several, and not as a unique passionate injury to herself.

It was curious that she did not lose her sense of the beauty of the garden and the country, and that although she was preoccupied she looked forward with interest to the coming of the Sinclairs on Wednesday evening. She wore for dinner an old blue silk dress, which, however, was so pretty in its rather fantastic embroidery as to make her look very young and fair. She was waiting for her guests a full ten minutes before they arrived, expecting their coming with definite eagerness, and going over in her own mind the details of their reception and entertainment.

While she waited she remembered that Howard's cigarette-box had been filled. She remembered also the curious name which Howard had mistakenly applied to her own cigarettes. It was in looking at an illustrated paper for women that she saw their real name. Readers of the paper were advised in the advertisement to smoke Tee-to-tum Cigarettes. Tee-to-tum—it came to her in a flash that a silly woman might give them such a nickname as the one he had jokingly used.

"Ugh!" said Marian to herself, with a little shudder. "They're scented; How horrid!" She did not observe that the paper had been thrown by her nervous hands to a distance of about a yard. That was the first sign she had given that she was enduring any strain. Nevertheless, she picked the paper up again and noted the address from which the cigarettes might be ordered direct.

ii

A few minutes later there was the sound of a motor horn; and, as she went forward to greet them upon the threshold, the Sinclairs appeared in a state of the greatest cheerfulness. Mrs. Sinclair came first, a buxom woman of something over fifty, with her head covered by a loosely-woven white shawl. She hurried into the drawing-room, laughing and talking in her hoarse, good-humoured voice; and took both of Marian's hands.

"So nice!" she cried. "Awfully nice! How are you? I'm afraid we're late. Oh, yes we are! I knew how it would be—they say it's the women who are always late; but that's not the fashion now. It's the men. They think it gives them value! Anyway, it wasn't I who kept the car waiting. I assure you!" She spoke so continuously that Marian was forced to delay her greeting of Tom Sinclair—the "old Sinclair" of her husband's age-calculation. He was a battered-looking man, battered with the weather and with good-living, with a sly expression that did not conceal his kindness and modesty. He had a long, withered neck, and the central protuberance was unpleasantly prominent. His voice, when he spoke, was dry and tart, with a suggestion of a general wryness; and his speech was tart, too.

"That beastly boy hadn't put any petrol in the tank. We'd have stuck on the road if I hadn't looked. I always look, now. At first I didn't. The boy's a fool. How are you, Mrs. Forster? Husband's away, I hear . . ."

Only then did Marian see behind Tom the slight figure of Nigel Sinclair. Both uncle and aunt made way for him, and so she had a clear view of his dark face and slim, erect figure. His hair was worn rather long, brushed straight back from the brow, but not destitute of a slight curl. He was perhaps twenty-six, and his

eyes were very piercing; but his mouth was extremely attractive, his lips parted, showing very white and even teeth. He was quite strikingly handsome, Marian felt. It gave her pleasure to see him and to meet his frank expression with one as perfectly cordial.

"This is Nigel," gossiped Mrs. Sinclair. "He's just as if he was our own boy, though he's Tom's brother's only son. Nigel—Mrs. Forster. Mrs. Forster, although he looks so demure now he used to be the naughtiest child in the world. No persuading him to do anything he didn't want to. And then hiding away and browsing and sulking. I tell you: I had him . . . However . . ."

"Really, Aunt Kathy!" protested her nephew. "It's awfully unkind to rake up the past like this!" Marian looked at him and easily saw that the protest was genuine, and due to shyness, so she smiled with enjoyment of this affectionate teasing and its amusing effect upon the victim.

"Rubbish! Mrs. Forster will soon find out for herself. But he's a good boy now, Mrs. Forster. He's lived through his naughtiness, and he's all the better for it. That's a thing that sometimes happens, I hope. Nigel, Mrs. Forster's the one sensible woman in the district . . . Besides *myself,* of course."

Both Marian and her third visitor felt that they were immediately upon the most excellent footing of acquaintanceship. A glance passed between them—a laughing glance of understanding. As it was exchanged the dinner-gong sounded; and Mrs. Sinclair caught Marian's arm.

"And you said we weren't late, my dear!" she cried. "Blanche must have had her watch in her hand for the last ten minutes!"

All this time Marian had not spoken a word beyond the ordinary forms of greeting; but her spirits were

mounting with every passing instant. For the first time for weeks her eyes were radiant. She felt young in spirit, beautifully young and warm and happy. She looked quite dangerously lovely.

iii

"I don't believe Blanche has got a watch," she whispered to Mrs. Sinclair, as they went into the dining-room. "Perhaps she keeps it to wear on Sundays."

"Just as well for us!" whispered back her visitor. "I know what parlourmaids are, my dear . . . what scenes they can make. Hysterical creatures. Oh, what a lovely dress that is. I know I've seen it before—yes, I know; but age cannot wither . . ."

Marian laughingly rebuked her, because Mrs. Sinclair was being indiscreet.

"It's not as old as all that . . ." she cried gaily, and in a low voice of protest. "Don't!"

They were seated, and Marian had glanced round the table. Her glance was so unobtrusive that no visitor ever thought about her qualities as a hostess. It was the penalty she paid for being a kind of artist, that nobody gave her credit for what was unseen. What a lucky person is he who can draw attention to his own excellence! It is the rarest of attributes in the sincerely virtuous.

"Anything happened at Hippeswell?" asked Tom Sinclair. The Sinclairs lived five miles away, outside a neighbouring village; but they had a generous interest in local gossip. "Any deaths, babies, or common infirmities?"

"Nothing," declared Marian, stoutly. "Nothing but a subscription for Mrs. Gupp."

"What another!" He was like an astonished bull at the news. "Good Lord!"

"Poor thing . . ." breathed Mrs. Sinclair. "She must be ninety-two. Why can't she die? I should. I should persuade myself that I was being buried in a gold coffin." Seeing that her nephew was puzzled, she explained. "Mrs. Gupp's a woman here who thinks she's a queen. A delusion. She's mad, and everybody humours her because the poor old thing's so beautiful."

"She's rather clairvoyant," urged Marian. There was a general protest. The Sinclairs were heartily prosaic and agnostic in every possible sense. Only Nigel seemed interested.

"D'you mean she foretells the future?" he asked.

"Well, she seems to have knowledge . . . No, it's *not* nonsense. I won't have you say that! I don't mean that she says 'a dark man will have a great influence in your life,' or anything of that sort. It's just that she's got a very acute sensibility. She seems to be able to feel the illness of her friends, and I am told she reads faces and characters . . ."

"Stuff and nonsense!" burst out Mrs. Sinclair. "I've seen the woman. She said to me, 'You're one who has never travelled far.' I might have shown her all Tom's Cook ticket-cases. He's got them all. It's the hoarding instinct. We went to Florence for our honeymoon, and we've been wandering ever since!"

Nigel looked quickly aside at Marian. She was again impressed by the piercing glance of his eyes. He had a very lean face, and his eyes were its most noticeable feature.

"You've taken the wealth of the Indies with you, Aunt Kathy," he said, gently.

His aunt frowned, puzzling for a moment at the speech and at Marian's laughter.

"Do *you* understand it?" she demanded of Marian, but with a twinkle.

"I'm afraid I do."

Mrs. Sinclair looked grimacingly at Nigel.

"It passes me by," she assured him, with an impudent and reproving nod. "Well, now . . . How are you, and how's your husband?" Her glance was shrewd, but not unpleasant. The assurances were repeated. "And what's he gone to town for? When Tom goes to town, I go with him. Travelled, indeed!" She gave a slight sound that was almost a snort, and looked inexpressibly good-humoured.

"She does," said her husband. "She does. By Jove, she does," he added, to himself.

"He'll be back to-morrow," explained Marian. "We shall both go to London at the end of September, for two or three months."

"September?" said Nigel, sharply. "I shall be in London then."

iv

"This boy's a Socialist," his aunt explained, later in the meal. "Beware of him, my dear. Once or twice he's almost persuaded me. I've had to send him to Tom. The worst of these young people is that they're so hard. They get hold of a few—call them facts, if you like; and hammer you with them as if there was nothing in life but those few facts. He talks about slum-property and employers and such stuff, as though life wasn't made up of all sorts of things."

"Oh, but Aunt Kathy, of *course* it is! Cream and Geography and Religion . . ."

"Shoes and Ships and Sealing-wax!" commented his aunt, destroying his ingenuous air of originality. "Yes, and love and ambition and folly, too. It's full of those things."

They all turned surprised eyes upon her.

"That's quite true, Aunt Kathy," said Nigel, seriously. He spoke no more for a little while. Then, when they had passed to other matters, he showed that his thoughts had been started upon a journey by his aunt's speech, and asked Marian in a deliberate way whether she was interested in life as something that went on outside one.

"I suppose so," Marian said, rather at a loss.

"I am. Tremendously. Oh, tremendously," he exclaimed with zest. "I shouldn't think you could ever get to know about everything that goes on outside; but it's splendid to try to grapple with it."

Marian thought for a moment over this eager speech, reading his ardour with interest.

"And not inside as well?" she asked, falling suddenly to an understanding of the inquiry he had made. It was the thing unseen that she continually dwelt upon; but she was not insensible to the general spectacle. Somehow her attention had been caught by his enthusiasm. She liked enthusiasm. She had so little herself that it acted upon her as a charm. She was awakened, amused at this young mind in action, already rapidly foreseeing the dangers that such impetuosity as he revealed would provoke in the course of his life. He seemed to her young—young and beautifully ardent.

"Inside? You mean—one's thoughts, and other people's thoughts? The things that aren't visible? Oh, yes . . . Is that what you like in Mrs. Gupp?"

"When one leads a rather stationary life—I suppose that's it. I think Mrs. Gupp lives in a dream. Poor thing!"

"That's the way to live!" cried Nigel. "At least," he added, "I wish I could live in a dream. Sometimes I wish that, too. It's so hard to catch everything and live to the fullest."

His aunt and uncle were gazing at each other.

"He's been in the sun," said Tom Sinclair.

"I've never—no, really, my dear, I've never heard him talk like this." Nigel's aunt was quite vehemently apologetic for her nephew's lack of decorous table manners. She was frankly concerned.

"It's very nice," pleaded Marian, with her sympathy aroused.

"I haven't been in the sun. I don't talk like this. Mrs. Forster, please forgive me. I was—I was simply interested. It was accidentally something I've been worrying about for weeks."

"We'll talk about it later," Marian said. "Another time when these wise people aren't here." And to herself she was saying "Twenty-six? He can't be more than twenty-one. . . . He's young."

Nigel turned to his aunt.

"It was you who started me off, Aunt Kathy," he told her, candidly. "You talked about love and ambition and folly. It was like salt on my tail. When I think of those things I always get solemn, because I want to understand them so much. They're instincts, at war with every kind of wisdom; and they're so extraordinarily powerful. They get in the way. They're such complications, you know."

"Poor lad!" observed Tom Sinclair, his withered neck distorted by some convulsion in his throat that made his protuberance jerk quickly. "They'll be getting up subscriptions for *him,* one day."

V

After dinner Nigel played, hiding the drawing-room's enormities by his own gift. He played readily, and with taste. Marian, sitting aside, realised quickly that some composers—especially those composers who reflected mood and reverie at their most subtle—had an extraordi-

nary fascination for him. He played one study of Debussy's with an air of absorption that deeply impressed her. It seemed as though he had the sensitiveness of an artist, not yet matured into the artist's peculiar comprehensions, and strangely crossed by the abrupt curiosities and endless questionings of a child as yet unformed. She found herself watching him with interest—almost with apprehensiveness. It was not that he struck her as helpless, or as weak or without balance; it was that she felt he had so much to learn before he should be fully developed. And as she thought that, Marian became self-reproving. She had caught herself building from nothing all sorts of suppositions—the worst form of day-dreaming, because it may end in a fabric of unreality. It was nothing at all: the young man was unknown to her: she would perhaps never see him again. Strange that he should so have awakened her interest! It was his youth that had done that, the boyish impetuosity of his manner, the revelation of a temperament contained in his playing. She watched his face as he sat at the piano, reading the sensitiveness of his lips, and guessing at the strange wisdoms that might lurk in his dark eyes. She would have given much to have had children, so that she might thus have learnt something of the unknowable in human character.

Then Nigel played two pieces of Chopin's—a Fantasie Impromptu and the exquisite Ballade in A flat,—and for the first time for many months she was moved beyond the power of expression. Not alone the melancholy—the loneliness—of the music, nor the sadness of the memories to which it was the key; but a quite singular perception that through all emotion there runs the incessant current of bitter unhappiness, tinged her thoughts and made the evening a poignant experience. It passed in a dream. Even when Nigel was not playing, the music

seemed still to continue in her heart, awaking there the melodies of other days, when her heart was soft and her mind virgin. There was little in the talk that intervened which made demands upon her intricate thoughts, and those few sentences exchanged with Nigel at dinner—at the time so thin and yet so provocative of sentiment thereafter,—and the sense of her understanding of his playing, mingled in her emotion and kept the general impression unimpaired.

"It's been so beautiful," she said to him, while the Sinclairs amicably quarreled. "I can play, but never to my own satisfaction. It's a great gift. You see how silent we've been."

Nigel made no answer—only gave her a quick, grateful look.

"He plays well, doesn't he!" asserted his aunt. "I don't like these moony things much. He ought to have played some good tunes, like 'Pomp and Circumstance.' However, I know I'm a philistine."

"You glory in it, Aunt Kathy!" Nigel laughed.

"People always do." Marian could not resist the dig.

"It's just as snobbish as the æsthetic cult, really."

The others looked gravely upon this badinage, but not unamiably; and it became clear that they were all going. Wraps were found, and hands shaken, and compliments made. It was with warm eyes of liking, that Marian bade farewell to her new friend. He seemed to strike a note in her that had been unmoved for many years and that now vibrated with exquisite sweetness. Her voice was the richer for the evening's experience. She was carried to the heights by what she had felt and thought. Nigel, too, was elated; but by her sympathy, which had aroused his spirits and made him very full of eager imaginings—not by any knowledge of the feeling he had created. They were both subtly happy.

"May I come and see you?" he asked. "Perhaps in September. I should so much like to."

"Of course!" cried Marian, with a quick glance that embraced all her visitors. "Long before then, I hope, if you're staying in the neighbourhood. We're here all the time—until September. You must all come. I should like you," she added to Nigel, "to meet my husband."

"I should like to meet him," Nigel cried. His voice carried the meaning "because he's your husband." His uncle and aunt were smiling at his enthusiasm.

They all went out at the front door, where the car stood waiting in the darkness. The moon was gone. Only the stars lighted the sky, and a swift little breeze whipped among the leaves and stirred them to a low whispering. The night air was full of scent, as fresh and sweet as the evening. They stood for a moment in silence—Nigel and she—side by side, while the others were getting into the car.

"Lovely!" Marian said quickly.

He was gone. The purring of the car grew fainter. She was alone in the garden and the darkness, her face upturned. Then she came back into the house, rather bewildered by the lights, happy and amused. It had been so pleasant, so curiously a contact with some kind of reality that she had half-forgotten, that she had the feeling of being brighter and more alive than she had been for many days.

"I'm quite . . . I hope that young man *will* come soon again," Marian murmured to herself. "He may be very inexperienced in some ways; but I like him for that as much as anything else. He's new. Perhaps he won't come—till September. Oh, then, come along, September!" She paused a moment. A strange thought had come into her mind. "September," she said, reflectively. "I suppose that's the month I'm always living in, now.

My summer's coming to an end, too. Oh, don't be sil
I do hate these sentimental applications. They're su
. . . such rubbish! Oh, but I wish I didn't feel
though I were so set, so uneager. So tired . . ."

Mechanically, she sat down at the piano. Her han
lay gently upon the keys. She was going back to da
so very long ago, with a breathless intensity that
tokened the strength of her recollection. With eve
year that passes, memories grow more real and m
pervasive.

APTER III: THE ARRIVAL OF CHERRY

i

WHEN the next day came Marian thought of Howard while she still lay in bed after her early of tea. Blanche had drawn the curtains, and the ning breeze and the early sunshine were both in the n, reminding Marian of her duties. She did not feel ned to get up, but lay in bed with her head propped nst the pillows and her hands resting upon the cover- The pleasure of her party was still warming her t, and from time to time she was smiling faintly. then the thought of Howard came, and she won- d where he was, and what he was doing. A half ctation formed in her mind that he would write or graph delaying his return, and her smile for the first grew rather contemptuous. The mood of happy in- nce was spoilt. Her heart was suddenly sore. She ped impulsively out of bed and sat there with her e feet resting in the thick warmth of the sun-touched In her nightdress she looked like a young girl, so le was the curve of her neck and so slim her figure. her eyes were old this morning, and the sunlight ly revealed the lines about them, and small lines t her mouth and below her throat. At last she put lippers and her dressing-gown, and went across to athroom.

ill Marian thought of Howard. He had been the man for her fifteen years before; and there had been another since. It was not that she was un-

attractive or that her nature was cold, but simply that she did not like playing with fire, as some silly women do, long after the days for playing with fire have had any heat in them to kindle noble flame. So when Marian thought of Howard it was as her lover and her husband, with whose life her own being had been for so long bound up. It still seemed to her peculiar that a single accidental remark should have provoked that sudden intuition about him. On all previous occasions there had been steps in her knowledge. She could not help feeling sure, even while she demolished her own intuition; and the sureness revived a shuddering distaste for Howard that she had only felt about a dozen times in her life. There had been times when she could not bear his presence, let alone his touch. It was as though some overwhelming arrogance of virtue had come upon her this morning, and she already felt the approach of this secret horror of him. It was not a moral horror, but a sense of physical repulsion, of contempt. She strove to check it, realising that life would be insupportable if once she lost grip upon herself.

So breakfast-time came, and the post. Marian sought hastily for a letter from Howard. There was none. Then it would be a wire, perhaps? She opened the first letter. It was from Alice Mant, written evidently late on Tuesday, and posted the day before.

"My dearest Marian. Howard came here to dinner to-night, and gave your kind invitation to Cherry and Robert. Of course they're both wild to come! It's too good of you; but I'm sure you'll take the privilege of an old friend if they're a nuisance and *tell me*. Then I'll send for them home. It will really be a boon to me to have them away. *Let me know what you think of Cherry*. I can't understand her. She's beyond me, and that's the truth, my dear. As for Robert, I never pretended to understand that boy, did I? I never knew

what it felt like to be 'all at sea' until the last couple of months; but these two children of mine are the most extraordinary pair I've ever come across. I'm really *frightened,* sometimes, when I look at them. They're so unlike Tom and me. They're so *hard.* That's what it is. They're *hard.* There is a sort of callousness about them that gives me a lot of pain. I know you think I'm a muddler, and I admit that you can manage Robert! but if you can manage Cherry you'll be doing the girl (and her mother) a kindness. Marian, my dear, I trouble you with my worries because there is nobody who understands as well as you do. You are so sympathetic—or you seem to be, and I expect that is the same thing, because . . ."

When Alice wandered off into psychology, Marian's attention failed. She put the letter back into its envelope, and turned to its fellows. So Cherry and Robert were both coming. And they were out of hand. Marian did not think very highly of Alice Mant as a mother. She was not capable of taking more than a pass degree in motherhood. She lacked the first requisite—imagination. Marian had it. She was not sympathetic in the sense of abandoning all self-respect for the sake of one in distress; but she had imagination, which will always obtain for its possessor a reputation for sympathy and a sufficient number of suitors for aid. Cherry and Robert! Her hands would be full! Perhaps their presence would distract Howard: certainly it would ease the situation. She felt appreciably more cheerful about the immediate future. When were they coming? How like Alice! Not a word in the letter to say!

An hour later the expected telegram from Howard arrived. Marian smiled drily at its appearance; but the message itself was unexpected. It ran:

"SEND CAR MEET SEVEN-THIRTY BRINGING MANT CHILDREN HOWARD."

"To-day!" said Marian aloud. "That's qu work . . . Oh, of course he was there on *Tuesd* . . ." She was instantly alert, planning bedroo and arranging in her mind the necessary accommodati for her guests.

ii

The evening came. She gave instructions for the to go to the station, and heard it start in good time meet the train by which her young visitors were trav ling. Then she inspected the bedrooms and saw th they lacked nothing. That done, she went down to drawing-room, to await the car's return. It was th that her eye caught the journal in which appeared th advertisement of Tee-to-tum cigarettes. In a panic, s laid it at the bottom of a pile of papers, smiling at h own sense of eavesdropping, and lightly pressing the p as if, like a conjurer, she could dismiss the offendi paper altogether.

"*What* a beastly room this is!" she thought, i pulsively. "And what a lazy person I must have be all these years to endure it!" The thought was s ficiently depressing. "I *have* endured it. I wonder wh It's a problem." She could not understand her o lethargy. It seemed inexcusable. Marian had sudde an uncomfortable vision of herself as a woman too l in the details of the day—perhaps in the meanderings her own mind—to attain a personal reality. It was h rible to have such a thought. She felt that perhaps af all she was a mere onlooker at life, unable even to ma her presence felt in the arrangement of her own drawi room. Yet the drawing-room, if she could have seen it that light, was a picture of her marriage—full of inc gruities and legacies and a naïve ugliness. It was neit her room nor Howard's, but a room they both used

rtesy of Howard's dead ancestors and perhaps of her
n.

'he car was whirring at the door, and in the moonlight
saw silhouetted three figures—those of Howard,
ert, and Cherry. She stood in the porch to receive
n.

iii

obert, in a business-like way, attended manfully to
luggage inside the car, while Cherry stepped from her
e by his side to the house-door. In the moonlight
ian saw that she carried herself well, that she was
and slim, and that her air was one of mingled timidity
assurance. As they had kissed before, so they kissed
, but without any suggestion of real caress. Marian
v the girl into the house, and looked quickly at her
he strong light of the hall, scrutinising the fresh
ng face and the veiled eyes. Cherry's eyes were quite
at this moment. They were wide open, clear and
adable, blue eyes without a stain of sin and without
ace of trustfulness. Her brow was clear, her nose
straight, her mouth bafflingly the mouth of a child.
ian, scrutinising so quickly, received something of
ock. She had hitherto discounted Alice's complaints,
he cries of a weak woman incapable of dealing with
owing nature; but she did so no longer. Obstinacy,
m, and a sort of wanton determination were to be
in the flower-like face. Clearly, Cherry's was no
y-grasped and easily-dominated character. Even in
moment of shock, Marian was conscious of a sudden,
ine out-going of interest in the young visitor. She
not a commonplace girl, whatever might be the diffi-
es of her stubborn nature. A quick spark in Marian's
t took fire. She could not see the future; but she
conscious of contact with personality not inferior in

strength to her own. Words of more than conventional greeting were forced to her lips.

"I'm *glad* you've come," she said. "I want you to be happy here."

Cherry looked back at her, not trustingly, not suspiciously, but with an obviously examining glance, prolonged an instant more than politeness would have justified—prolonged sufficiently to be on the verge of impertinence. She smiled faintly.

Marian thought: "Why does she dislike me?" Then, hastily, seeing that it was not dislike, but a sort of measuring interest, that lay in Cherry's face, she put that thought quickly aside. Instead, she realised that to win this girl's confidence would be a task of difficulty. It was over in an instant, this exchange of impressions; and Howard and Robert had followed them into the house. All four stood under the electric light for a few seconds. Decidedly, of the three faces presented to her, Marian liked best that of Robert, whose affection she knew to be hers. He took her arm with a cheerful air of liking.

"I say, how ripping it is!" he cried. "I'm so jolly glad to be here."

As Cherry turned away, Marian saw almost with a pang how graceful she was, and how well she walked. In the light her fair hair seemed powdered with gold. She was lovely. But the interest aroused in Marian's mind was not warmed by any sense of happy confidence. Already she felt constrained under the glance of her young guest. The girl, it seemed to Marian, was one to play for her own hand; and in such play she would perhaps be ruthless. All the same, Marian did not dislike her. She merely felt it necessary to be upon her guard.

iv

Yet it was something, also, to have aroused in her the sense of that necessity. Marian did not often feel that she must be upon her guard. She was naturally so reserved that there was no conscious disguise in her manner. She was accustomed to go coolly through all her relations with others, living a very quiet inner life, but never the elaborate diplomat which some Machiavellian writers upon conduct suppose every human being of character to be. What Cherry gave her was the sense of being unamenable to the ordinary laws of polite intercourse. She was not well-bred: her defiances and her judgments were still ostentatious, as one would expect from a young girl. What was disquieting was the fear that they were possibly being confirmed by a natural selfishness which led her hastily to penetrate inferiority and to exploit it and to derive satisfaction from the sense of power over it. And yet, as Marian instantly realised, all such terms were much too hard, and were, moreover, the fruit of some instinctive hostility—the knowledge that Cherry was not merely not malleable, but that she was definitely perverse.

"I don't think I do like her," Marian thought. "No . . . What Alice says is quite true. She's hard. But I'd like to understand her. If she's hard, perhaps it's because she's mistrustful. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . ." She did not finish her thought. She came back to her attitude of detachment, and was not aware that the detachment was not quite perfect. It was not quite perfect because Marian was in a mood to be sensitive. Where young Nigel Sinclair had seemed to her so cordial, and so candid, Cherry was baffling. She was sufficiently a woman to arouse something like jealousy, and still so evidently a child as to suggest most attractive immaturity. It would be lovely to have a daughter like

that—lovely, and fascinating, and heart-rending. She was less mysterious than baffling. Yes, she was ill-bred. Marian was decided upon that point. She was ill-bred because she did not accommodate herself superficially to others. She watched them. She scrutinised them, making obvious comparisons. She was conceited, hard, selfish . . . and all the time she was real and lovable. She was immediately seen to be more real and more lovable than any girl in all this country district. Marian was torn. She drew a deep breath, anticipating battle. Her mouth set a little. If Cherry was conscious of superiority, so was Marian, when that superiority was challenged. She was kinder, because she was older. But she knew that if Cherry was the more callous, with the callousness of childhood, she herself was more cold, with the balanced self-control of the mature woman. If Cherry made the mistake of under-rating Marian, she would find that Marian too had her quality.

All this passed in Marian's mind while the travellers were preparing for dinner. She looked perhaps not quite in vain for some sign of curiosity from Cherry. It came. Cherry swiftly contrasted their evening gowns. Her eye rose, higher, higher, like the fleet darting of the eager swallow. It was gone in an instant. Marian had a sudden sense of power.

"She's only a child!" she thought, her mind as quick as Cherry's glance. Impulsively she took the girl's arm as they went together towards the door. "Poor child!"

CHAPTER IV: AFTER DINNER

i

DURING the whole of the meal that curious interchange of examination persisted. With Marian it was unobtrusive, because she had naturally acquired through long habit the ability to observe without seeming to do so. Cherry had still to look at what she wanted to see. She was almost quick enough to avoid giving the impression that she stared; but she was still too slow to hide her interest and her jealousy. She wanted, it was evident, to know what Marian thought of her; and was piqued at being able to discover nothing. The pique showed in a slight brusqueness. She did not make herself agreeable, because she was not at ease. That involved her in silences. Evidently she did not talk well, unless she was the centre of the party. With all eyes upon her, perhaps, in uncritical admiration of her charm, she would have shone like a wayward star. But she did not talk well upon general topics. She was too used to a success founded upon her superficial presence. She was, even, too reliant upon her power to please; so that if that were denied, or questioned, she fell back into a flat discontent. All this Marian gathered by means of genuine observation, which is a different thing from an enumeration of points. That was the advantage which her years gave. None the less she watched the instinctive grace of Cherry's movements, the little unconscious and impulsive starts and responses produced by various passages in the talk, with something like a pang of envy. No longer had Marian this naïve, this delightful grace.

It was the priceless possession of youth, like the sudden gay laugh that came so infectiously from that tempting mouth, and that shone in those expressive eyes. With every moment Marian was aware of the girl's personality, her tenacity, her selfishness, her innocence, her sophisticated and troublesome self-consciousness. Really, the child was a puzzle! At one minute she seemed wholly fresh and beautiful, like a modest flower; at another she was a secret and viciously alert woman with ten times Marian's experience of baseness; at another still she was a self-indulgent baby, callous through thoughtlessness, but not the less attractive upon that account, even to Marian. She was troublesomely baffling! The pains she took to be mysterious were the least baffling thing about her, and the youngest. She was in love with herself, and easily wounded by the least doubt of her own power. She was wounded now by her inability to dominate Marian. She addressed herself almost exclusively to Howard.

Marian was so occupied with Cherry that she could not think of Howard. She only felt that he was being amusing, and making them all laugh, as he had always been able to do, as long as she could remember. He sat opposite to Marian, his eyes twinkling, and his thick laugh baying in among the general laughter. His face was red, but it was a fresh redness, and they all looked happy and in good health, so that the party was a pleasure to the eye.

ii

The party was also a party well-satisfied with its fare. The dinner was good, and the service. Knowing the Mant household, and Alice Mant's shortcomings as a housekeeper, Marian knew well that if Cherry had perceptions of such things, as she supposed, the management

of the house would establish in the girl's mind a sense of her own competence. The table was beautifully set, the details of the meal perfect. Order was in everything, and yet not so elaborately there as to be obtrusive. Already, Marian was paying Cherry the tribute of believing that she could appreciate the causes of efficiency in house-running. She was only ruffled when it suddenly occurred to her that she set store by Cherry's opinion. The knowledge was piquing and humiliating. She could have given a little chagrined laugh if she had been alone.

Meanwhile Howard, at the other end of the table, was romancing.

"The porter who had to carry Cherry's luggage was bent double," he was explaining. "He looked at the trunks——"

"The one portmanteau," Cherry corrected, laughing.

"He looked at me. He said 'All *these*.'"

"He said 'This *all*?'" Cherry explained.

"And with a groan he staggered along the platform."

"He *was* a little bent; but that was rheumatism."

It amused Marian to find that Cherry's little birdlike glances in her direction revealed anxiety to please and to impress. The girl was perturbed at Howard's exaggerations.

"Cherry always has a lot of things," asserted Robert, ruthlessly. "She has to have a different dress for each day."

"Robert, that's not true. You've no business to say it." A sharpness had come into Cherry's voice. She looked with quick anger at her brother.

"You know how long she means to stay if you find out——"

"Robert!"

"I'm sure there won't be enough dresses if you stay as long as we hope," Marian said. "But I'd like to see all

you've brought. Living in the country all the summer makes one enjoy other people's dresses with a kind of fury. You mustn't take any notice of these envious men, Cherry."

"I don't." Cherry's retort was brief.

"I must admit the porter found us an empty first," supplemented Howard.

"He bowed more than ever at his tip," explained Robert. "He was a very old porter. I should think he was a hundred. Auntie, I've brought two suits beside this business." He indicated his black clothes with an air of distaste. "Which will you have first?"

"The pepper-and-salt or the salt-and-pepper?" cried Cherry, scornfully. Her eyes were bright. She turned triumphantly—not to Marian, but to Howard. She kept her eyes on him for a moment, and as she turned away Marian caught their lustre. She smiled a little drily, seeing that Cherry was more at ease with men than with women. And even as Marian was thinking this, Cherry glanced swiftly in her direction. The glance was an extraordinary one. It was for the first time suspicious, almost furtive; and it was as instantly averted. It gave Marian a most disagreeable impression.

"I don't believe she's straight," came the hurried thought. "She's got something to conceal. How strange!"

iii

Another thing Marian did not like was that Cherry had her wine-glass filled more than once. It seemed as though her palate were jaded—as though, for fear of dulness, she sought stimulant for the sake of excitement. This she did quite unconsciously, however, so that Marian could only suppose her to be in the habit of drinking more than the girls in that district were apt to do. It was a

small thing to notice; but Marian was noticing everything that Cherry did, observing and recording, in order to attain something like a comprehension of the girl's character. Some of her ways accorded so ill with the flower-like face and the almost bewitching expression of innocence which at times it wore that Marian was checked again and again. Cherry's moods appeared to change each instant, and her expression and character along with them.

All left the table together. Cherry smoked one of Howard's cigarettes, which he offered quite naturally to her. She also took a second. Marian noticed that she smoked without any of the awkwardness common to girls who handled rare cigarettes. And yet, however much Marian may have wished to disapprove, she found herself watching Cherry with a curious secret admiration. She even sighed. Again the longing had come to her for a daughter with just such personality as this, disciplined as it might have been by an upbringing of greater care.

They went back into the drawing-room, and the air was still light, the sky very clear, and a faint breeze stirring. The evening so invited them that they all strolled a little in the garden, wandering down by the edges of the lawns and under the pergolas covered with climbing roses and along to the edge of a small wood that bordered one end of the garden. For a time Marian and Cherry were together, but only for a time; and when they had grouped to look at some evening primrose it fell out that Robert took Marian's arm and the other two became lost to view.

Robert—a youth of seventeen or so—was full of stories of what he had planned to do during his long summer-holidays, which had just begun. He was to go away at the end of the holidays to the home of a school chum, and was artlessly eager that his stay with the

Forsters should be long and crowded. Bird's-nesting, chemicals, botany, stamps, bicycle rides, tennis, walks—these were only a few of his desired employments. He talked quickly, voluminously, because he knew and loved Marian. The time ran by, and the darkness became greater; and at last Marian turned back towards the house. It was ten o'clock. The others were still out.

"Good night, auntie," Robert said, and gave her a rapid hug before disappearing. She was left alone in the drawing-room, waiting.

iv

It was twenty minutes later before Cherry and Howard came in. Cherry's dress was to be seen before they arrived; and to Marian, sitting near the window, but in the shadow, it seemed as though the girl was holding Howard's arm. They walked quickly, hurrying, as though a sense of the hour's lateness had come suddenly upon them, and drew apart as they neared the house. Marian rose and went to the open French windows to meet them.

"It's very tempting, isn't it?" she said in a friendly way, and smiled at both. "Robert's gone to bed. I think he was tired out."

"Oh, so am I!" cried Cherry, in an exhausted voice, and sat abruptly in a chair. As Howard came in, humming, he turned and made fast the windows, and switched a curtain across them; but Marian, looking down at Cherry's face, was astonished to find the girl's eyes bright with tears, and her lips parted.

CHAPTER V: CHERRY IN THE MORNING

i

A FEW minutes later they all went to bed; and in the hall's semi-darkness Marian could no longer see Cherry's face with its curious exalted expression that was between joy and sorrow. She brooded upon the girl as she undressed; and as she brushed her hair she several times paused to con over this strange problem of character as it was presented by her young visitor. She could not deny that she was profoundly interested. Her mind went searching for explanation of the tear-brilliant eyes and found none. There was so much she did not know. She wanted more keenly to understand Cherry than she had wanted anything for many years, because the contrasts, so violent, so inexplicable, intrigued her. No, she had no clue. The child's radiant eyes haunted her long after she had blown out the candle, and while she lay waiting for sleep. She saw again Cherry's lovely little face, the ease of movement that betokened self-confidence, the look that was almost a stare at herself, the urgent, half-angry expression that had greeted the teasing of Howard and Robert. Clearly the girl was sensitive, and took herself very seriously. The suppressed eagerness to know what Marian's attitude was to her dress, to herself; her air of attentive listening; her elaborate nonchalance; all of them were a part of some secret unease. Below that might lurk deliberateness, a callous pursuit of her own ends; or she might be the merely ingenuous child that other attitudes had suggested. She might be

all sorts of things that Marian could only dimly guess. How strange it was to be thus eager! Marian felt the little pucker come into her brows. She turned restlessly. Then her hand went quickly to her firm throat, feeling its outline. A faint warmth came to her cheeks. In the darkness her eyes were smiling, but with a smile that lay deep in sad understanding of life. Again she turned; again that impulsive speech came to her lips, as it had done earlier, abruptly completing her rapid assessment of Cherry's characteristics.

"Poor child!"

If this girl could once know what power for love Marian had, how warm and cordial was her instinct to give endlessly and with enduring sympathy. If she knew, too, what capacity for coldness, for cruel punishment of transgression, lay also in the enigmatic heart of this older woman, so experienced in painful knowledge of the soul's secrets! The smile stole to Marian's lips, which were gravely and tenderly parted. Marian had no need to speak, to tell; she had so much self-control that she could hardly yield to the strength of her own emotions. Her cool perceptions chilled even her own inclinations to love and to surrender to love. And her love was so untroubled that she had as yet no fear of its power over her will.

"Poor child. Poor child. So sure of herself, so unsure, so clear-sighted, so blind, so all-curious, so timid, so ignorant . . ."

Long afterwards Marian lay awake, half-dreaming of Cherry, inexhaustibly speculating.

ii

In the morning she dressed with her usual scrupulous care, again in pale grey, and was first downstairs, as cool and as much mistress of herself as if she had not been

engaged in this complexity of apprehension. Cherry was the next comer, dressed in a beautifully simple gown of pure daffodil yellow. She was so charming, that Marian drew a long breath. The pink cheeks, the gay manner, the clear eyes, of her new puzzle were a tantalising delight to her. Cherry was radiant, and as fresh as the morning, from which the light mist was rising under the sun's rays. She came quickly into the room, stopping short at the sight of Marian, half embarrassed.

"How lovely it is!" she cried, in a wondering sense of the morning's beauty. They did not kiss; but exchanged a glance that fled as soon as it was levelled. Only Cherry glanced again, as a lover will quickly kiss a second time when the first kiss has been so sweet. And Marian knew.

"Let me show you the roses," she said, with her spirits mounting. "We're both so early. I'll show you an arbour where it's always cool. And where there are no spiders; but only cushions. A lovely place. Nobody goes there. Come along." They were quickly out of doors. "If you want to read, or to get away from the heat, the arbour's the most delicious place in the world. Only a stream could make it more beautiful . . ." There was a silence as they walked across the first lawn and felt the morning sun upon their cheeks. Their steps were uniform; both walked so easily that they kept pace by instinct. Marian went on, "I want you to feel that you're quite altogether at home here. I know how horrid it is to be away, and to feel that you're being watched and entertained, and as though everything you do is public. But we never have that feeling here—or we try never to let our friends have it . . . Many people say that: with us the saying's true. Do you understand that? I hope you do. There won't be any plans made . . . No least expectation of your obedience . . . d'you see?"

"Splendid," Cherry said, half under her breath. "You're so very kind."

"Well, be happy . . ."

"I wonder if I shall be," startlingly mused Cherry. Marian could feel the sudden piercing distrustful dart of her eyes, measuring. She wondered if Cherry also had been busy in estimates. Such a question could not stay in her mind: the moment gave no opportunity for further thought. Her own return scrutiny was a warmer, embracing glance that took in the quiver of Cherry's lids as they quickly responded to some sensitiveness—perhaps to concealment of a yet more inquisitive survey.

"Of course you will," Marian said, very low. "That is, if you don't . . . dislike me too much."

"Dislike?" The young face was puzzled, perhaps because the speech had been too frank.

"Say, distrust," corrected Marian. "Be at ease."

There came a little sigh. Cherry was reflecting. She impulsively turned and took Marian's arm, like a confiding child, and her voice was very quiet, as though the words came against her will. She gave the impression of being entirely plastic, the lovely child of innocent responsiveness.

"I don't know why you should be kind to me," she said. Then, even more quickly, so that the words were breathless, "You know I feel such an outsider. It's not quite fair to me. You're so much more . . . somehow . . . finished than I am. You've got more self-control than I have."

Marian did not answer. How envious, how grudging, had been the child's tone! They continued their walk to the arbour, which was covered with nodding pink roses. Within were garden chairs and the tumbled rods and ropes and netting of a hammock. It was a lovely corner, so shaded that it was cool, so open to the breeze that it

was airy and unconfined. Cherry released Marian's arm. As if in chagrin at her impulsive candour, she was frowning slightly; but when she turned again there was upon her face such an exquisite smile that Marian seemed to read deep into her heart as bees dive into harebells. At that moment there seemed no barrier between them. All human loveliness rose from Cherry's heart like a sweet breath, and filled her face with wonder.

iii

It was much later, when the morning was far spent, that Marian knew how little the girl had given in open confidence. It was as though she was guarded, in spite of her sudden avowal of inferiority. Nevertheless, Marian was only dimly conscious of this thing, and her thoughts were untroubled, because the explanation lay so readily within reach. If Cherry was guarded, it was because she did not speak readily, did not yet trust so as to be able to tell with candour her ordinary thoughts. Marian was not at the end of her intuitions regarding Cherry. And she had never in her life pressed for confidences. She was too proud to do that, herself too self-assured. She was never dependent upon the views and confessions of others, but made her own judgments and drew her own inferences. She used every smallest piece of self-revelation in her imaginings, and so her portraits became true and living things. In that they differed from the character-readings of others, who make up their minds in a moment—by what they call instinct—and spent the rest of their time in being surprised and in refusing to correct their impressions.

Howard was late for breakfast. He was late to reach the breakfast-room, demanding his breakfast very loudly in order to prevent rebuke from all present. But his elaborate scheme was defeated. He did not escape

Cherry's reproof, which was almost resentfully delivered.

"You're shamefully late!" she cried. "Shamelessly, I mean. You don't deserve any breakfast at all!"

Marian thought:

"She likes Howard. She's more at ease with him than she is with me. She can tease him."

For his part, Howard took little notice of the rebuke. He glanced with cheerful superciliousness at each face in turn, his own cheeks red and cheery, and his great height and breadth both emphasised and justified by the flannel suit he wore.

"Pooh!" he said. "All the same, I overslept myself. I grant it. I grant it. These things will happen . . . Robert, my boy: you're the youngest male present. It would be only decent of a fellow to give me a piece of . . . No, I'll have toast. Kindly pass that rack. Thank you. Thank you, all. And now you may tell me what you've been doing all day, while I lay there incapable of moving. Robert: how far have you walked this morning?"

"From my room, here," explained Robert, unabashed.

"Well, that's honest, at any rate. And Cherry?"

"I had an appetite for my breakfast," said Cherry, sedately.

"Sedentary folk!" He did not put a question to Marian. She had not expected that he would, and would not have remarked the omission if Cherry had not shown by an uncontrollable movement that she had noticed Howard's lack of interest and enjoyed it with a certain naïve and malicious delight.

iv

After breakfast Marian left them. She had her necessary morning's work to do, and she was being true to her own promise that Cherry was to be entirely free.

The luncheon was to be discussed with cook; a couple of letters were to be written and various messages and instructions to be given. She was absent about an hour, and upon her return found Robert outside the house with a bicycle and a spanner and a small pump. He had found the bicycle he had used upon earlier visits, and he was putting it in order for use later in the day and in the holiday. At Marian's arrival he looked up, rather grimy and breathless, saluting her with an appearance of preoccupied pleasure.

"This old jigger's rather gone to pot, auntie," he observed, briefly. "I've got to oil it. Listen to this!" He span the pedals, which huskily showed themselves to be out of condition. They were checked, and ran free for a very short time. Marian made a sound of regret.

"Very bad. It hasn't been used since you were here last. Did you bring your tennis racket?"

"Rather! Not that I'm tennis-mad this year. It's because I haven't had any practice. I've been going in for cricket. It's a great game. I'll tell you what, auntie: cricket wants *brightening*. There ought to be more slogging. If I had my way I'd delete averages—simply wash them out—never allow them. Then you'd get it as a game. Have you ever seen chaps scoring? Putting down a dot in each corner and two more on the sides, and counting the maiden overs. They gloat over them. Maidens! As though they mattered! What's a maiden over in a real sporting game! Boredom, auntie; boredom pure and simple. The old bowler gets broken-backed and bowls his heart out; the batsman doesn't think of hitting the ball—only of getting set and getting two up on his average; and the fieldsmen get slack. No. It's averages that are killing cricket. They've made it a science instead of a sport." He stood with his feet wide apart and his dirty hands hanging, the fingers fastidiously

outspread. His button nose seemed quite irrecoverably supercilious, and his wide mouth was the epitome of contempt. Nobody could have questioned the seriousness of the problem or of his concern with it.

"All you say sounds—unarguable," Marian admitted. "I once went to . . . was it Lord's or the Oval? I forget. And what I liked was the beautiful sound of the bat. It gave me the same thrill that I get from hearing butter patted."

"Jolly fine!" commented Robert. "Oh, but you want the end of the day, and long shadows, and a small country ground like Maidstone, and everything beautifully drowsy and happy." He was enraptured at his own recollection. "I once saw Kent play Sussex at Maidstone . . . Oh! . . ." His sigh was delicious. The memory was of a red-letter day. "There was nobody there but me—I mean, Cherry had gone mooning off with some fellow, and mother and father stayed at home. It *was* a treat!"

Cherry! Mooning off with some fellow! Uncontrollably Marian shook her head. As though she had spoken aloud, Robert looked up.

"She's like that, you know," he said. "Oh no . . . I oughtn't to have said that. Gives you a wrong impression. She's *all right,* you know, auntie. But she's no end of a silly idiot, all the same."

Relief came to Marian at this enlightenment. Robert was so transparent that she knew he was speaking honestly. But it was one of her traits that she persuaded people to speak the truth to her.

"Did you notice where Cherry went this morning?" she asked, more to cover the difficulty than to obtain information.

"No," said Robert. He had scratched his head and had gone back to the bicycle that lay at his feet. "Oh,

yes I did, though . . . She and uncle went down the garden. I expect they've gone for a walk. Uncle said: was she ready? . . ."

Marian smiled at his preoccupation with the decayed bicycle. Then she wondered where the others had gone. Had a walk, then, been arranged beforehand? Funny . . . She left Robert and walked slowly in the shade, carrying her garden basket and moving towards the small orchard, where ripening apples were catching the sun and coyly peeping from cosy nests of leaf and twig. What a lovely day it was, warm and fragrant, without a cloud and without fret! It was a midsummer day, but with the air not yet staled and earth not yet parched. Everywhere was the same precious silence and the same subdued stirring of life. She was curiously happy.

CHAPTER VI: AFTERNOON SUNSHINE

i

THE others came back before lunch-time, hot from their walk, but in high spirits. They did not seem very clear as to where they had been; but Howard was joking, and Cherry had her pretty little mouth closed and curled in a gleeful smile that did not show her teeth. She was nonsensically happy. When she spoke, her voice was light, as though the sun had chased away the faint hoarseness which she occasionally betrayed. Robert, after a wash, had recovered his composure, and was inclined to be exultant over his morning's work.

"The bike is a good bike," he exclaimed. "It's not half a bad bike—*now*. When I took it in hand it was absolutely a ruin. How it had got into that state . . ."

"Desuetude, my boy; desuetude," remarked Howard. "Just as I sometimes show the effects of age. . . ."

"How silly!" cried Cherry, her cheeks reddening.

"Howard's rather old . . . at times." Marian's amusement at Cherry's sudden scowl was great. "He sometimes forgets how old he is."

"That's when I'm with you," Howard said.

"Or me——" Cherry's eagerness was irrepressible. She turned almost elaborately to Marian. "He's not a bit old, really. Not a bit old."

"It's his affectation. His chief affectation."

"Well, *I* shouldn't like to be as old as uncle. No, that's not right . . ." It appeared that Robert felt himself to have been guilty of a *faux pas*. They waited

patiently for him to drill his thoughts. "What I mean is . . . Listen! I'm getting on for seventeen. Uncle's about three times my age. I'd like to be as young as he is when I'm fifty-one."

"But he's not fifty-one." Cherry's voice was grim. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Did I say he was?" asked Robert, studiously polite. "Mind you, there's this to be said about uncle and me . . ." They waited, breathlessly. "If he's young for his age, I'm old for mine. I sometimes feel I'm a hundred——"

"Oho! I always do that!" roared Howard.

"It's a good age, of course," said Marian.

"As the crow flies." Howard was in fine feather, and had them all very much at his mercy.

"No. A hundred. It's quite true," protested Robert, unoffended. "You don't realise, of course. You think I'm a boy."

"So you are." Cherry's tone was low, contemptuous. "Ridiculous!"

"I'd rather be as old as me than as young and idiotic as you," scathingly retorted Robert. "I *do* know what I'm doing." He was scarlet, and Cherry was sparkling with anger.

"I'm not young," she said. "I'm all the ages. I've got no illusions."

Marian tried amusedly but warningly to catch Howard's eye. To her surprise he was looking uncomfortable. So she had to deal with the difficulty herself.

"Robert feels old because he's cleaned up the bicycle," she explained. "And I feel as old as the hills out of sympathy with him."

That brought calm, and a quick curiosity from Cherry.

"How old *are* you?" Cherry demanded in her abrupt way. It was clear that she had never wondered about it,

and never known. She was even imperiously rude in her inquiry.

"I'm thirty-eight," confessed Marian.

The relief that shone in that darkened face was unmistakable. It was as though Cherry, her jealousy aroused and appeased within the instant, had ejaculated in satisfaction, "Oh, then you're *quite* old!" Marian grimaced to herself, feeling snubbed. Her feeling towards Cherry at that moment was not at all cordial. She thought: "Nasty little wretch!" But she was rather rueful. After all, she *was* thirty-eight!

ii

The lunch proceeded in very much the same strain. It was clear that Robert was as a thorn in Cherry's soft flesh, and that Cherry was the subject of subterranean musings on Robert's part. If they loved each other, as Marian could not doubt, the love was very much that loyal hostility of brother and sister. They were half the time in a state of contemptuous animosity towards each other, and the animosity showed no development, but only an incessant sensitiveness.

If Howard had been her husband in mind, as well as in fact (they had gradually ceased to exchange intimate perceptions in the course of the last ten years), Marian would have discussed this relation with him; but it never occurred to her nowadays to do such a thing. She knew she must store her impressions in secret, for a re-examination that had all the features of miserliness without any of the impulses of that instinct. More than anything else, she needed this sympathy of perception. It was lacking, and so her married life was a stupidity. She watched the two children without reflecting that all her understandings must be secret and incommunicable.

A long streak of sunshine burst into the room, carrying

its horrid revelations of the atmosphere they were breathing. Round and round whirled the motes, with that hideous air of mechanical purpose that makes them a source of constraint and madness to the sensitive mind. On and on they roamed the air, soulless and unspeakable. Marian fell into a sort of dream, watching them. Her eyes became set, her lips closed. When she came once more abruptly to herself it was with the sense that she was under observation. With merciless, hostile expression Cherry was steadily regarding her. It gave Marian a shock to be aware of such a ruthless examination. She looked back, half-angrily; and Cherry's gaze dropped, not abashed, but in concealment of her thoughts. Nevertheless, her thoughts had been plain. They had been those of curiosity, not of love.

iii

Lunch had not long been finished, and they had all just strolled rather limply into the garden, when there was a far distant humming, recognisably that of a motor-car. All looked to the distance, where a tiny cloud of dust showed upon the road, rising thick behind the vehicle that was not yet visible to them. Cars in that district, and in this direction, were so rare as to be of very great interest to all—even to visitors, accustomed as they must be to the endless processions of London streets. They grouped upon the lawn, shading their eyes, much as they might have done at the intermittent roaring of an aeroplane. They still could not see the car; but the dust-cloud grew larger, billowing up above the hedges.

"I see it!" cried Robert. He had caught the glint of one of the brass head-lamps in the sun. "Quite a small one! It's coming at a good pace, isn't it!"

Howard turned to Marian with a look of inquiry.

"You didn't expect anybody, did you?" he asked.

"No. Probably it isn't coming here at all."

So it appeared. The car was lost to sight. What was so curious was that when Howard asked her that question Marian had felt her heart beating a little faster. How strange the feeling had been! And what in the world could have produced that more rapid action of her heart? Marian was puzzled to account for it. She moved restlessly towards Robert, who had thrown himself upon the grass.

iv

When she turned again it was to see Cherry and Howard disappearing in the opposite direction. She looked after them for a moment, because it gave her such pleasure to see that slim figure. It was clear to her that Cherry did not wear corsets: the movement was too much that of a healthy, unconfined body to permit any doubt. That was an impression she had not consciously had before. Instinctively her hands stole to her own waist. She murmured to herself "Thirty-eight . . . as old as that!" and her cheeks were warm. A small, clinging feeling of annoyance came. She was vaguely irritated with herself for some unaccustomed vanity; but she was quite definitely irritated with Cherry for a pettiness that she despised. In vain did Marian say "She's very young": even very young girls were not so tough in their cruelty as was Cherry. A faint unhappy sigh came to Marian's lips. She nodded slightly. It was as though she were saying "Poor Alice Mant!" And yet Alice perhaps was to blame; for a well-brought-up girl would not have carried into the world this vulgar habit of obvious judgment. Back went Marian's mind to a truer vision of Cherry. It all arose from that confessed sense of inferiority. Cherry was all the time trying to create an ideal superiority out of nervous reaction from a too

candid sense of her own shortcomings. She was always trying to reassure herself by noticing the failings of others.

Musing thus, Marian looked round again, to find that she was completely alone. Robert was far away, tormenting his newly-renovated bicycle and pedalling along the road upon which they had seen the motor-car. She was solitary in that part of the garden. It was then that she resolved to go into the arbour, to read for an hour before tea; and so she found a new novel and came out again to the arbour, in which she sat, drowsily reading the book while bees hummed near by and a lark swam high above warbling his rapture in the cloudless sky. Far far away that hushing sound of light breezes among the leaves, as soothing as the noise of lapping waves. Marian was not asleep, but she was dreaming. Her book fell gently to her lap, and her eyes softened as she looked out into the radiant garden. The sounds receded and came again, soft and still. Everything was happy. Marian was happy. It was an unblemished moment in her life.

V

She had been there for perhaps an hour when she was impelled to walk a little in the garden, under the shady rose-arches; and she went out into the sun once more, still in her quiet dream. Unconsciously she was smiling, her cheeks faintly coloured by the afternoon's warmth and the happiness which she had been feeling. Without consciously directing her steps, she moved first this way and then that among the flowers and the bushes, so heavily scented as a result of their response to the sun's heat. She came thus to the edge of the little wood that bordered the garden; but she came to it, not direct, as from the house; but obliquely, because her path had been

so unconsidered that she had strayed far over the garden. It was for this reason that she came unobserved upon Cherry and Howard, who stood together in the shade. They were closely embraced, and Cherry's head, thrown back, revealed the beautiful line of her throat. Her eyes were closed. She was lost in some dream of happiness, closely pressed against Howard, ardently loving. Howard's face was bent to Cherry's; his eyes vehemently searching out the childish loveliness of the piquant lips and chin and brow. That both were in love Marian could have no doubt. She was seized with a chill horror.

CHAPTER VII: A VISITOR

i

IMPULSIVELY, she turned away, moving swiftly and in silence across the grass, as far as possible trying to remain hidden from the entranced pair in the wood. She was not thinking: she was a prey only to her secret knowledge. For that moment there was no motive in her mind but the effort to escape notice. But as she walked a flood of little driving emotions racked her. She had seen two lovers; but not lovers in whose happiness she could rejoice. These were lovers whose future could be nothing but unhappy. There was anger in her heart—anger with Howard, anger with Cherry. She had no wound, but an indignation with their concealment, the unfitness of the relation, even—ridiculously—with a kind of panting protest against such indiscretion as they had shown. It was monstrous that Cherry should have been brought to the house! How she seemed now to understand the girl's hard scrutiny of herself, and how clearly explained was that reserve which she had noticed and forgiven! Angry and trembling, Marian stood still when she was out of sight of the wood. If she hated duplicity she hated both Howard and Cherry. She could not restrain her ugly indignation.

For long, she remained in this agitated state, torn and breathing fast. The quick reaction came in an attempt to steady her own nerves, to face the situation with self-control.

"I must be very cool, very quiet," she said to herself.

"I must think of the best thing to do. I must be slow. And not too priggish . . ." With extraordinary swiftness her mind was at work upon Cherry's mind, like a crochet needle gathering threads together and giving them due form. She imagined Cherry, her fancy straying among inclinations to love, finding Howard curiously attractive, vigorous, even alluring in his masculinity. She thought of darkness and a laughing kiss, of a gradual reliance upon her power to please Howard, wantonly inquisitive about her power to attract a man, seeking for a satisfaction different in kind from the casual conquest of trembling boys. So girls loved older men—not with love, but with a secret excitement at an increased sense of danger. So, perhaps, Cherry, venturing farther, and carried farther yet by Howard's experienced handling of young hearts, had come at length to this rapturous yielding to her love of love. Was it that? Or was the girl a wanton, playing with fire, playing with hearts, and drunk with her own vanity? How difficult to judge!

Marian was not cool. Her thoughts fired other thoughts, and the train went flying into vivid speculations far beyond the reach of her ability to phrase and recognise. She was in that nervous state in which women glimpse chaos, their intuitions so swift and in such conflict that the outcome is a burning mist through which hideous blacknesses rush and blot out the light. She was lost to all sense of space and time, momentarily a madwoman, clairvoyant in lucidity; but incapable of comprehending the drift of her own perceptions.

ii

There came to her no impulse to return to the wood. She too clearly saw the two lovers standing there in the shade. She could not, by so much as a call, have brought them to her side. Breathing quickly she went back to

the lawn near the house, where, in the shade, stood a tea-table. Even as she approached, Blanche came again from the house, carrying a tray. Marian did not realise where she was or what preparations were in progress; but when, an instant later, the bell was rung to summon the wanderers to tea, she started, her one thought being that the lovers would hear the bell, and be forced to return.

Robert came strolling over the lawn, from the house. He had evidently washed after his hasty bicycle ride, for he was rosy and vigorous. To her eyes he seemed taller and more manly. If she looked at him for a moment with some uncontrollable suspicion, lest he too should be in process of deceiving her, the glance was reassuring; for whatever sins that aged air of guileless innocence concealed they were not yet those of deliberate love-making. He seemed to her still, as he had always seemed, a clean boy, and a good one, who would make an honest man. He approached rather languidly, but did not disguise his muscular strength.

"Thanks, auntie," he said. "Jolly good thing—tea. In its place. In the garden, I mean, on a day like this." He sat down, sprawling a little. Then he started upright, his ears pricked. "What's that?" he said. "Car again?"

So it appeared. They could not see anything; but the sound grew louder. The humming was more pronounced.

"It sounds . . ." Marian stopped in wonderment.

"Stopped!" cried Robert. "Somebody coming here."

He stood up, looking expectantly towards the house; and just then Blanche appeared at the door, conducting a visitor—a young man. Marian's breath was suddenly lost, it seemed, in astonishment, so unexpected was the appearance of this newcomer. She had no power to

accept him naturally. It was Nigel Sinclair who was coming across the lawn towards her.

iii

The young man presented, in his suit of flannels, a very different figure from the one which she now knew to have been in her imagination since the evening of the Sinclairs' visit. He was not merely the thoughtfully ingenuous critic of a life outside his own experience, or a pianist of unusual skill. He was, as Marian saw, a strong and virile creature, with physical beauty quite other than the decorative. As he walked he carried himself with a poise that showed him to be well made, muscular, and in good condition. In evening dress he had been graceful and charming: he now appeared as an athlete. The dark face and darker eyes which had seemed fit for thought and for vision were disconcertingly those of a young man alert to participate in the vigours of sport. Something disappointed her even while she admired him in this new rôle. It was somehow unwelcome to Marian that he should be so strong, and in this so outside the range of her sympathy. She greeted him with a generous pleasure, and presented Robert. While she was thus engaged she was aware that Howard was near, coming straight from the direction of the wood. Her glance flew to Howard's side; but Cherry was not there. How her heart was beating! She made the two men known to each other, watching both faces to gain a sense of their mutual impressions. Both, however, were unreadable. They shook hands, and looked with interest, but gave no sign of special curiosity. Why should they have done so? And yet to Marian, tortured as she was, it appeared that things could not be so casual. Surely Nigel must be able to read further? Urgently she sought Howard's expression again. It told her nothing. Howard stood

there simply as the tall broad-shouldered man-of-the-world, polite and cordial to a stranger. Had she not seen him with Cherry she would have suspected nothing. He was the Howard of every day: nothing more.

Her next impulse was to say, startlingly, "Where is Cherry?" She could not do it. Her heart seemed to be like water, and her mouth dry. Some feeling made her cramped and silent. Constraint seized Marian. But she was in a moment once again cool. Her lids dropped once for a long instant. And then Cherry came from behind her, and with a gravity altogether unexpected made Nigel's acquaintance. To that swift, feeling glance to which she also was subjected, Cherry gave no responsive sign. Clear and candid, without constraint or boldness, she carried herself with a modest air that held no flaw of insincerity.

Marian drew a long breath. What duplicity lay here! What extraordinary and hateful self-possession! It was hideous! It was unbelievable. She felt chilled and unhappy—not jealous or angry; but a prey to nervous distaste. Steel came into her glance; the bitter chill of remorseless contempt for dissimulation. It was only as Cherry seated herself that Marian caught suddenly, above the low-cut blouse, a fluttering of the breast that showed a heart throbbing fast under that tranquil demeanour. And Cherry's eyes were wet. What an enigma! A sharp sadness came to Marian. Uncontrollably moved, she sighed deeply.

CHAPTER VIII: TENNIS

i

THE pleasant clink of teaspoons, and the accomplished cutting of cake by Robert, took them all, it seemed, into a mood of superficial content with the afternoon. The sun was so hot, and the shade in which they sat so delightful, that all grew languid. They reclined at ease. Only the hearts of all sang and beat with hidden emotions. Marian could not think: she could only play hostess with half her usual enjoyment, mechanically aware of empty cups and plates, and obediently attentive to their replenishment. It was like a dream. She felt how unreal was this peace, and yet she was enthralled by it and made to feel that upon such a day secret things must be concealed, thrust deep in ordinary demeanour and pulsing with graver measure than the unseen excitements of the hour demanded. They questioned Nigel as to his journeyings, his going and his return, and the doings of the Sinclairs, and the chance that had brought him there this afternoon. He, as if sharing their mood, responded with drowsy sense of the place and the hour.

"They're both very well," he said; "and they would have come with me if there hadn't been some odd people over from Aldeburgh. They want to come to-morrow afternoon, if they may. If you'll be at home."

"Of course!" cried Marian, quickly. "And perhaps you'll play tennis then?"

"As a matter of fact,"—he perceptibly brightened—"I brought my racket this afternoon."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Cherry, unconscious of Marian's slight frown at her sudden irruption and interference with the reply which should have come from one of the Forsters.

"We'll have a sett after tea," suggested Howard.

"You and I will play Howard and Miss Mant . . ."

How did Cherry like that? wondered Marian, even as she spoke. There was even a faint tinge of malice in her thought. All of them were cheered at the notion. The men lighted cigarettes at once, to show that they had finished. It seemed that the arrangement was what they all desired. Marian, stealthily taking in the scene, was conscious of a fresh delight at the prospect.

"I'll get my racket at once!" Nigel rose. All three males rose, and Howard went to the house with Nigel. Robert disappeared. Marian and Cherry were left alone. The girl, hesitating for a moment, left her chair and stood irresolute.

"Howard will bring our shoes and rackets," Marian reassured her. "Have some more tea!"

Cherry made no reply beyond a smile and a shaken head. Marian lay back in her chair and looked at the slim figure. She was no longer angry. She was perfectly cool, perfectly critical and composed. Again there surged in her breast that unspeakable envy of youth. There was so much in Cherry's health and naïveté that attracted her and made an unfavourable sense of her own maturity rise chokingly. And yet, with all Cherry's youth, there was the disadvantage that goes with youth. Cherry appeared so much without sense of direction, as though she lived—like a kitten—from moment to moment, chasing the will-o'-the-wisp of impulse, that the dangers before her were exaggerated. If she had been older, the scene in the wood, so expressive of her power for momentary ardour, would have assumed a different

meaning. Even now, her superficial ease lent that scene a more sinister appearance. But Marian was too experienced to expect moral standards from young women. It was fear of consequences and of interpretation that kept women to ordinary paths; and to that kind of fear Marian thought Cherry might be a stranger, purely in virtue of her youthful disregard of the future. Again Marian sighed, not at a puzzle, but at Cherry's helplessness in face of her urgent desires.

ii

It was not long before the men were back, walking together in silence, and obviously unsympathetic (though not hostile) in temperament. They carried rackets and a box containing tennis-balls. Howard had changed into costume suitable for tennis, and had brought shoes for Cherry and Marian. They were all equipped for the game, and they proceeded to the lawn, upon which two nets were erected. The men tightened one of the nets and practised for a moment while they were waiting for the others; and it was with amusement that Marian saw Cherry take one or two dancing steps as she went forward, bending her lithe body in inexpressible grace. She ran lightly to the farther court, taking her place abreast of Howard, while Marian followed more slowly. Already there was another change in Cherry. She was alert. Her face was a little flushed; her eyes sparkled, and her toes seemed to twinkle upon the grass. She had all the spring and the excitement of childhood, eager and mischievous at the prospect of a fresh game. Also, it was clear from the carriage of her shoulders, she was confident of her skill, and not unwilling that it should be admired by Nigel. Indeed, without appearing to wish to attract him, Cherry was affected by the presence of the young man. She did not look at him; but Marian knew

that she was subtly aware of him all the time. It was quite ingenuous, and delightful; it held no significance at all. But it was apparent, and Marian's mind embraced it as a knowledge.

The men span a penny for choice of courts. The game began. The white tennis-balls were gathered; the yellow rims of the rackets flashed in the sun; swift serves were made. Dull sounds of running feet upon perfect turf; the whing of the racket as the ball was struck went sharply through the air. Little cries, the calling of scores, the quick thud of the balls upon the ground, gave stimulus to their enthusiasm. Battle was joined.

iii

Exultant at the exercise, Marian felt a new energy within her. She was conscious of skill and elasticity and strength. She was proud of her partner's brilliance, and her own ability to support it. As if magically, they understood each other and played together in extraordinary harmony. The game was hard-fought. Cherry, at the other side of the net, was like a fury. She ran, she stood, she served and volleyed, with unflagging pertinacity. To an onlooker her grace of movement would each moment have given fresh cause for tense enjoyment. Whatever fault there was in the other court was not due to any failure of vivacity upon Cherry's part. She was tireless. Lovely and radiant, she had verve and precision. Her confidence had not been without justification. The first game, and the second, carried them all to a high pitch of thrilling conflict. Breathing faster, they were all alike remorseless in their vehement lack of consideration for the possible weakness of others. That is, they played with all their hearts. Only afterwards did Howard's years tell. His pace grew slower; his volleying less certain; his returns occasionally erratic and mis-

timed. Gradually he was worn down. His build was against him, and his breath grew shorter. He ran less, and once or twice let a ball go that in the first game he would have returned with ease. Marian's mouth set more firmly. They had lost the first game, and won the second after a tremendous struggle. Thenceforward she and Nigel had the advantage throughout. In vain did Cherry try to cover her partner's failures. Steadily her radiance decreased, her small frown grew, her at first imperceptible ejaculations of impatience less guarded. She ran and struck with almost vicious energy. She did not lose well. She was bent upon winning, and the losses were a humiliation. Her play grew at times unscrupulous, so that Nigel's brows went up at one time. She looked once with a shrug to a missed chance, and gave her shoulder to Howard in evident displeasure.

From where she stood Marian could not hear any speech between the partners; but she could read Howard's attitude and the silent response of discontent that Cherry made. As her own mouth set more firmly, so her determination for victory was intensified. It was not victory for victory's sake: it was quite definitely a cold resolve that Cherry should be beaten and discomfited. Chance had given the girl into her hands that afternoon; and she would not stint the measure of her success. She herself did not tire. She was hot; but she kept her head and played up to Nigel as she could never in other circumstances have done. That game was to her symbolic of the struggle that was between them. Cherry had challenged her with all the arrogance of youth: well, Cherry should understand now, once, that Marian was not contemptible. It was her first victory over the spoiled child. Let Cherry understand, from this, that Marian was not to be despised with impunity. It was as though she had set her teeth.

The game continued. It swayed; but it went steadily in favour of Marian and Nigel. They did not exchange glances; they spared nothing from their common will to victory. It was not without significance that Nigel was as ruthless to Cherry as he was to Howard. He too was out to win. He was courteous, and unruffled: but Marian could not have had a better partner; for he too was resolute. Neither gave respite or quarter. The end was not in doubt.

"Game . . . And sett!" cried Nigel. Instantly his muscles relaxed. He gathered the balls. The others had to pass him as they returned to the hammock-chairs upon the fringe of the lawn; and Marian was within earshot. She saw Cherry stop in passing, and heard her small grudging speech to him, dictated by she knew not what miserly defiance of his skill.

"You play quite well," Cherry said, from between her teeth.

A moment later they were all at the chairs; and as Marian was sitting in the third Cherry went deliberately to the one which stood alone upon Marian's farther side. She sank into it without speech, her face dark and her mouth slightly open, not as though she were petulant but as though her chagrin were undisguisable. Marian, if the men had not been there, would have touched her hand —even though it should be resentfully withdrawn;—but she could do nothing but coolly regard her triumph.

"Thank you, Mrs. Forster," said Nigel, as he took the chair beside her. "You were splendid. Splendid. It was a fine game."

Howard stood breathing hard and looking from one to the other.

"You two played like giants," he said, with an uneasy glance beyond Marian. "And Cherry was a Trojan. I'm afraid I'm not up to your form. I think——"

Again that uneasy, almost beseeching, glance—"I think I owe my partner an apology. Sorry, Cherry . . ."

Cherry made no reply. She was looking fixedly into the distance.

"Ah!" thought Marian, perfectly aware of the situation. "She can punish! Yes . . . yes . . . She can punish inexorably! What a girl! She's merciless! She's cruel! What a girl!"

CHAPTER IX: THE EVENING

i

THEY begged Nigel to stay to dinner; but he could not do so. He had promised, he said, to be home again in time for the meal. Accordingly they assembled in a group—Robert mysteriously re-appearing so as to have full opportunity for the examination of Nigel's small car. The good-byes were said, a sudden whirring startled the echoes, and a moment later they were listening to the car's receding hum. Only then did Marian awake, to find Robert strolling away, and Cherry close to her elbow, and Howard directing a pathetic appeal to the figure at her side. Inexorably Cherry gazed into the distance, moving when Marian moved, faun-like in her timid eagerness not to be alone with Howard. She was both stern and timid, like a stubborn child already half-conscious of naughtiness but nevertheless constant in cruel resolution.

Marian was torn between impatience and relief. Impatience because such behaviour was inhuman; relieved because for the moment it removed her fears to a distance. She was worried and amused, sharply wondering if Cherry had suddenly awakened to a sense of reality or if this was but the instinctive coquetry of a shallow nature. More she could not read. But her very doubt of Cherry softened her anger with Howard, whose case she saw to be that of the elderly lover who never can be sure of his triumph, or of its endurance if won. He was bereft of the confidence which easy victory

too insubstantially creates and which has no stability. He could hardly at this moment disguise his feeling for Cherry. He was no longer sure of himself. To Marian's eye he was grotesquely middle-aged and humble—not the girl's master, but now her malleable toy. It was ridiculous! Cherry's power over him was beyond disguise. It was not now Howard who enticed the devotion of an immature girl; but Cherry who dominated the uneasy male, shamed before her by his own failure in a manly sport. If he had never played tennis at all, he would have retained her belief—because a girl so easily accounts in a lover for a lack of any achievement never attempted. At it was, Howard had failed, and Cherry's vanity in him had been wounded. Not only that; for Cherry herself had been humiliated by defeat, and her nature was clearly one which could not endure defeat. But even while she thought thus intricately, Marian realised that she was accounting for a situation of which she was not yet sure. The odd, cruel determination that Cherry was showing was another critical sign. It was a sign of stubbornness that might be merely vicious or the naïve disappointment of a child whose idol has been damaged.

"Mooning off with some fellow. She *does* that . . ."

The words recurred to her. Was Cherry as experienced as all that?

Some ghost of ancient love for Howard may have whispered. Marian had a quick pity for him.

ii

The estrangement continued through dinner. Cherry came down late, having evidently delayed so as to make sure that there would be at least a third person present on her arrival. She did not look at Howard during the meal. She was disconcertingly not sullen, but very composed, like a woman of maturity; and, for Cherry, she

talked a good deal during the meal. Had her talk been of a taunting or a wounding kind Marian would have grasped the situation; but it was not. It was quiet and assured. Marian knew instinctively that Cherry would not suffer Howard to touch her that evening. Calmly she would keep him at a distance. She was immovable. Her "no" would be final—not the "no" of delay and hesitation, but the singular and imperious refusal of a woman without mercy.

"It's extraordinary!" thought Marian. She herself knew that power. She had herself exercised it. She knew that Howard, like any other amorist, was cowed by it. She knew that it came from deep within the heart —this definite denial of contact or communion. So she had felt in breaking marital relations with Howard. In another woman she saw its inhumanity; but she knew it to be as intractable as the sudden stoppage of a horse upon a hill. "I will not." Not will spoke, but instinct, which is a thing unconscious in its workings and more powerful than any resolve.

"When you go to London," Cherry said, addressing herself exclusively to Marian, "what do you do? Do you dance, or go to theatres, or play bridge . . . or what?"

"We go to theatres," Marian explained; "and we go to see our friends. Sometimes I go to a dance; but it seems to me that these newer American dances, and even the American style of waltzing, although they're very good exercise for the muscles, no doubt, are not very pretty . . ."

"Oh, they're beautiful," said Cherry. "At least . . . not beautiful . . . They're very interesting to dance— if you get the right man to dance with. Some men don't seem to be able to dance for nuts. It's waste of time trying to teach them. Are you fond of dancing?"

"The old dances—yes." Marian was smiling at her arrogance. It was so unconcealed. Cherry was so sure of her superiority in the art; and she could not hide her contempt.

"I'm devoted to it. You see, I'm a very good dancer. You don't like doing a thing unless you can do it well, do you?" A new, almost humble, note had come into Cherry's voice.

"No. Of course not."

"Most people don't let themselves go enough. You ought to be perfectly limp, and yet like steel. It's the only way to dance, but people are so silly. They don't know . . ."

Cherry's speech suddenly lost confidence. To Marian it seemed that the girl's quick mind had become aware of the obtuseness of her first assertions. Possibly she was afraid of Marian. So young, and so sensitive, she was at the mercy of ridicule, and she may have imagined in Marian's attentiveness a kind of hateful gibe that froze her thoughts. If there was no uncertainty in her handling of Howard—after all, he might be familiar material—there was a different atmosphere in her relations with Marian. Marian was unplumbed. Cherry had not the clue. With men it must be almost always the same key—a single desire, to be played with; but not extravagantly variable. A woman must know more. So it appeared that Cherry was afraid. Her natural arrogance could not deny to Marian both grace and beauty. However sure Cherry might be of superiority, she could hardly feel reassured in face of Marian's self-control. The whole thing was a comedy, in which Marian did not exult, but in which she certainly found amusement.

iii

All this time Robert had listened impatiently. He had touched his knives and forks; had re-arranged the napkin upon his knee; had looked from one to the other.

"What about the tennis?" he demanded. "Any good? Was that chap any good? He looked all right; but you can't tell."

Cherry frowned at Robert. Her manner was resentful.

"He plays better that you'll ever be able to play," she observed. "I don't know that I'm very keen on tennis. It's a . . ."

"You *seemed* rather keen," put in Marian, laughingly. "I'm beginning to feel tired now. You gave us a hard game, you know. I'm very fond of it."

"You play well," Cherry said, judicially. "That's what I meant. I'd like to do everything well," she added, impulsively. "It makes all the difference. If you do a thing badly it's . . . it's not very pleasant, is it?"

"It isn't!" said Howard, with marked significance. She did not heed him, but continued:

"I'd like to ride and drive well. I *can* drive; but I can't ride. I can drive a car. I wonder if Mr. Sinclair would let me drive his. I could soon learn it."

"Yes, and smash it up, too," interpolated Robert. "I could drive that car. I've driven a car like that. One of our chaps—Wentworth—his father's a doctor, and he's got one of the same kind. A bit bigger, of course, not a two-seater . . ."

The talk went away before Robert's technical disquisition. Howard sat through it, gloomy and distrait, showing by the puzzled frown upon his whole face he was half-inclined to sulk. He had tried to recover his position, and had failed. What a difference from the

situation of only four hours earlier! With quickly closed eyes Marian visualised that scene in the wood. The recollection was so clear that it made her sigh. And she sighed again at the knowledge of Cherry's present self-possession. A faint aversion stole through her consciousness. In that instant she was aware of dislike for this girl, that passed as soon as it was recognised. It passed because, however cruel Cherry might be, and however selfish and experimental, she was obviously clean, and not the sentimentalist who would have aroused distaste. It was her cleanness and her health, rather than her prettiness, that kept Cherry still pure in Marian's eyes.

iv

After dinner Marian saw Howard go to Cherry's side; but he could say nothing, because the girl turned instantly to Marian. The eyes of the two met for a second, and it seemed as though there was the smallest possible appeal to be read in Cherry's glance. Marian answered it at once. After all, might that not be the solution of this affair? During the evening they were never apart. When they went out together in the garden their arms were linked, and Howard remained indoors.

They walked slowly about the garden. Once, when their steps had turned without purpose in the direction of the little wood, Marian was conscious of a drag upon her arm, and an obvious unwillingness on the part of Cherry to go that way. Was it because the place was sacred? Or because a feeling of repulsion had arisen in the girl's heart? Was their silence to be one of concealment? Or was there to be a small confession? Marian did not know which to hope for. In one way a subdued voice, and a hesitating but not indiscreet avowal, would have been a relief; but perhaps Marian did not want that? She was not sure. Perhaps the mere thought of the pos-

sibility was conventional . . . Ought she herself to say anything? How difficult it was, with an unknown character such as Cherry's!

The darkness closed upon them, warm and fragrant. The night was there, and the faint sounds of the trees were all they heard. There was no emotion between them, no love, no hate,—only a suspense. Neither was in the least aware of the other's thoughts. Both were mysteries—Marian a mystery to Cherry; Cherry a mystery to both Marian and herself. Marian felt that a hundred years of life had made her old. How old—how really old—was Cherry? Had she any age at all? Was she a child, a woman, an impulse, a wanton? It was insoluble.

v

Startlingly, as though they had been groping through the same impenetrable forests, Cherry put a personal conviction into words.

"Isn't it funny how women have to work in the dark," she said. "They have to guess such a lot. They can't *know* . . . It all goes on in their thoughts."

"Yes," Marian answered, in a moment. "Sometimes they do more than guess."

"How d'you mean?" The muffled voice gave no hint that Cherry was applying the words to herself; but Marian could be sure of nothing in this dim light.

"Sometimes they see things . . . notice them. Then all their thoughts hurry to the place and supply interpretations. Sometimes they're wrong interpretations.

"Very often, I should think," said Cherry, quickly.

"It depends on the woman."

"I suppose it does. I think women are horrible . . . sometimes."

"So do I," observed Marian, drily. She presently added: "All human beings, of course: both men and women. But I think perhaps women get morbid. They don't trust, and they conceal, and get insincere. It's so easy to get pushed off a clear path and into the undergrowth. And then they lose their nerve."

"Yes. It's beastly to lose your nerve. Do they, with men? Or only with other women?"

"I don't know." There was quite a long silence. Just as when one looks fixedly into the darkness the degree of opacity seems by some optical fact or illusion to vary, so it seemed to Marian that her sight of Cherry's heart cleared or was obscured each instant. When Cherry spoke again her voice was beautifully warm and intimate.

"I don't trust people enough," she said. "There are all sorts of reasons."

"It's very hard," Marian agreed. "I try to trust them, because—well, everybody knows that it's only by loving people that one learns to understand them. It's difficult to love anybody who doesn't trust you. Of course, I don't mean . . . By trust, I don't mean that one wants them to be liquid. That's horrible. Some women pour out all sorts of gush, and that's a great obstacle to loving them. Still, I do think there might be more happiness in the world if one could be less suspicious of good faith. One is so beastly in making up one's mind too soon. One interprets and misinterprets actions and little speeches . . . I don't think I do; but I can't be sure."

"You know," Cherry said. "You speak so much more easily than I can do—I mean, without . . . It's not exactly what I mean; but there's a phrase 'giving yourself away.' However much you say, there's always something behind. There's always something—one knows—that you don't say. I should like to be like that."

"I should think you would be. You're not as old as I am. With more experience——"

"Oh, I've had lots of experience. Too much, of some kinds. I see things too clearly."

It was an abrupt speech, almost reckless in its impulse, with a very unyouthful harshness of tone that wounded the hearer by its rough self-contempt.

"I meant—assimilated experience," Marian urged, controlling herself.

"I wonder," mused Cherry. "It's a funny thing—I trust you; and yet not in everything. I should be afraid of what you might think of me; but I know you wouldn't misunderstand me."

"No. I don't misunderstand people," Marian said, gravely.

"You haven't done the things I've done; but you know more than I do."

"I'm older."

"It isn't that!" Cherry's arm jerked impatiently. "It's your nature."

There seemed to be no useful reply to be made at that instant; but Marian, conning the speech, said a moment later:

"My dear, every heart knows its own seeking. I've suffered a good deal in my life, and that's why I know a good many things. But you think you have impulses I don't understand. Nothing I could say would convince you that I *can* understand, because we all think ourselves superior to our fellows in something or other."

"Superior," said Cherry. "I suppose that's it. I'm very thoughtless and selfish."

"Yes." Marian's reply wounded her companion, as she instantly knew. She went on: "Those are superficial things. Thoughtfulness of others is often only a kind of creeping indifference to them. It's a form of self-

gratification. In doing things for others one sometimes increases one's sense of superiority to them."

Cherry listened with all her eager, childish attention.

"If you love them," she urged. "I'm very affectionate. I like people very easily, and get tired of them very quickly. I'm restless and . . . rather beastly."

"Well, if you're honest . . ." Marian turned towards the house. "If you're honest that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'm rather tired of the cultivated 'nice' girl, who is *so* unselfish, and *so* thoughtful of others. If she's sincere, she's liable to be rather stupid; and if she's insincere she's worse than most other climbers. I believe in character. I'd rather have a man or a girl who is honest with herself, even if he or she has many faults, than one who is always posing. A girl who worships the legend of her own goodness or attractiveness or straightness is very unpleasant to me. But I think you have very quick impulses, and very quick self-contempt, and that you have the capacity to suffer a good deal. If you can endure, then I think you'll be a very noble woman."

There was another silence—the faintest little tug of Marian's arm. Then a moved, rather hopeless voice said:

"You think I can't endure?"

"I think you may. I hope you will."

"No. I shan't. I'm not strong enough. I'm too selfish."

Marian pressed the young arm close to her side, emphatic in her turn.

"That's to be seen. I think everything is possible to you. But only if you wish it."

"You don't know about me!" It was almost passionate. "I want so many things. I want them and want them . . . hard. *Now.*"

"If you want a thing—I hate to be such a wise-acre;

but I must tell you this . . . If you want anything on earth, it's worth waiting for. If you want it enough you get it," asserted Marian, moved and reassuring.

"Now *when* you want it, though. No, no. And even then . . . it's . . . You don't get it. And, besides, I can't wait. I'm like sand, or water. I shall never get what I want. Not what I want most of all."

"What is that?" Marian asked.

"I think it's tranquillity. It's what you seem to have. Perhaps you haven't got it? You seem to have such composure." Cherry's voice was very low, as though she were a little confused, but pushed by her urgent need of sincerity in their present conversation. Marian thought—it swept her mind like a dust storm: She was in Howard's arms so short a time ago! But the thought did not stay. It passed as suddenly as it came, leaving her unblanched. "Yes you have. I'd give anything to have that. D'you know that I'm twenty different people in five minutes? I've been many just while we've been talking. But you've never changed at all. All the time you've been the same. Always your face to me . . ."

"That isn't true. I've changed as often as you. You can't read my heart."

"Thank God you can't read mine!" cried Cherry, gaspingly. Her arm trembled. It was half withdrawn. In a sober voice she went on, like a child confessing: "But you *can* read mine . . . sometimes. Sometimes you can read all I feel. I can tell that. I can't hide from you." To herself she was supplementary, reassuring her vanity. "Not always, though." Her voice had changed again. It was quite hard. But the hardness was passing, a chill upon the eager heart, now too full to recover discretion at will. Forced from her was the next

speech, almost of agony. "Oh, if only my mother had been like you. If *only* she had!"

She stood quite still, and her forehead for a moment rested upon Marian's shoulder, and Marian's other arm protectingly about her. There were no tears; but their moods were not then apart, for Marian's sympathy was fully given and Cherry's reliance upon it for this instant unquestioning. So they stood, until Cherry stood upright once more.

"I've been silly," she said, in a low voice that held a sort of ashamed laugh.

"No," answered Marian, gravely. "Not silly." They both smiled in the darkness, although Cherry's head was turned away. Mechanically they both moved forward, and again stood looking out across the meadows.

"Aren't I funny!" whispered Cherry. "You're not funny."

"At any rate I'm not unfunny," protested Marian.

"Oh . . . You're quite splendid. I know. Somehow I wish you weren't so splendid, because then I shouldn't feel ashamed before you."

There was no possible answer to this, except the smile Marian returned. That it was seen, and appreciated, she had no doubt, for Cherry's eyes were sharp as a little bird's. In silence they walked slowly back to the house. Cherry pressed so close and hugged her arm so tightly that Marian could feel through the girl's thin bodice the warmth of her soft breast. There was no need for any further speech. What was to be said between them had been said, and more would have been useless. Cherry had spoken of nothing that could be supposed to refer to Howard; but she had opened her heart. And in Marian's philosophy no good action and no good impulse—not even the impulse that produced an offer of love and trust and sympathy—could ever be lost. She was content.

CHAPTER X: SATURDAY

i

THE two had been so long in the garden that Howard had gone to bed by the time they reached the house, and their own parting was immediate. For just an instant they were close together, and they kissed quickly. Cherry did not allow her eyes to be seen, but vanished up the stairs like a fairy. Robert followed. Marian was left alone to close the French window and to extinguish the light. Then she too went upstairs, and undressed in the darkness, hearing about her, as she had done during all their talk, the soft swishing of the wind among the leaves. The moon was very bright, high in the sky; but it did not shine farther into the room than Marian's dressing-table. In the bow window there was a square whiteness, very brilliant and very cold, like truth unsentimentalised.

For perhaps an hour Marian lay awake, thinking of the events of that day. She thought less now of these than of her own part in them. The fact that she had been made to feel more acutely than usual was apparent to her, and she was exhilarated by the knowledge. So it was not true that emotion or the power of emotion died. Emotion and the power to feel and to evoke it were ageless. She was almost excited, her thoughts thronging her mind like characters in a dream. She was full of vibrations and responses to all these impressions of the day. Even at this moment she did not suppose that an episode had been finished by her talk with Cherry. It was clear that she was only at the beginning of some-

thing the character of which she had not distinctly seen. She was thus moved, not only, or so much, by the events, but by expectation of the future. The days to come held more than the day that had passed. The morning, the talk about Cherry with Robert, the glimpse in the wood, the possible sequels and her vehement doubtings, the coming of Nigel. . . .

Of course, it was Nigel who had changed the whole face of the day. How odd that she had not realised that! She smiled again, exultantly, at the tennis victory. If he had been a poor player all might have been different. They might have lost. The emotion could hardly have been aroused as it had been by the game that had been played. And yet perhaps the situation would not have been so wholly different; for in that case the battle between herself and Cherry would have been simply more apparent to both. Marian's lips set.

All the same, the thought of Nigel, when it came, gave Marian distinct pleasure. She was glad he played well. She was glad of many things about him. He engaged her interest. Her last conscious thought before she fell asleep was of him.

"How funny that he should have come over this afternoon! How nice!"

She dreamed of Howard as he had been and as he was no longer.

ii

The next day was Saturday. Early in the morning Marian awoke to find the sun burning through a thin haze, preparing for a day hotter than any they had yet had. It was a beautiful morning, and the songs of the birds made a volume of sound that was almost oppressive. Far above she could hear the lark; starlings and finches were piping; thrushes, that ran creepingly upon the lawn

near the house, sang thrillingly. Little wagtails were darting about near the house with a movement closely akin to that of mice. It was a great cluster of music. She could not stay in bed, but bathed and dressed and was in the garden before seven o'clock. Even so early the dew was almost gone, and bees were already busy among the flowers. Everywhere else there seemed nothing but silence. Now she was out-of-doors the early-morning noises of the house were forgotten, and she could stroll gently through the garden sure of solitude and peace. The light wind was both sweet and searching. It was part of the day's beauty.

An hour passed. She looked back towards the house, and saw that Cherry, lured as she had been by the extreme radiance, was coming impetuously towards her. The girl's face was flushed and lovely, her eyes clear, her lips parted. At the sight of her, Marian's heart softened, and she moved forward for the greeting. Together they went back to look at some roses which, having been buds yesterday, were to-day in perfection—long slim flowers, not fully opened, but rich with scent and tenderly yielding their secrets to such reverent eyes. Standing alone, with lowered heads, Marian and Cherry were as charming as the flowers. Both so fair, both so graceful, they annihilated the years between them, and were strangely alike. If Cherry was more piquante, Marian was taller and her carriage better. They were unobserved, and in repose. In their hearts there was no smallest feeling of difference or comparison. It was the morning's work, this uncommon unity and happiness. They were seriously smiling with pleasure and interest in the disclosed beauty of the flowers they loved. In accord they moved presently away, no word being spoken, and turned towards the sun, walking slowly and at ease.

The larks mounted higher. Their songs became re-

mote exultations amid the heavy blue atmosphere. Farther and farther away they climbed, invisible to the eye, all heart and song. For a moment these two stopped and looked up, shading their eyes with raised hands. It was a morning of entire fairness, unspoiled by cloud or dust.

iii

Back in the house, they found Howard and Robert, standing at the door and surveying the scene with nonchalance. But while the nonchalance of Robert was true, Marian could see the disquiet of her husband at such apparent sympathy between herself and Cherry. He shot a hostile and suspicious glance at herself, the nick in his forehead betraying his puzzled annoyance. Suspicion lurked also in his longer glance at Cherry. But it was for Marian that his expression of hostility was reserved. How strange men were! Howard was jealous here, not of another man, but of Marian. Marian could have laughed in his face, so bovine was his look, and so easily read his perturbation. And as soon as she had had this inclination for laughter she felt again that pity for him which had come to her on the previous day.

"What an immoral woman I must be!" she thought. "To feel sorry for my husband because he's in love with somebody else. I ought to be angry with him. I ought to despise him passionately. I ought to make a scene." She sighed. Then: "If I loved him, I suppose I should do all those things—except make a scene. I wonder how one makes a scene! One feels choking, I expect, and some little thing happens that brings everything else tumbling down into a violent wish to break and break and break—to kill, and destroy . . . I wish I'd got a strong anger, instead of this . . . whatever it is that makes me feel sorry for the people who seem to me to

be stupid. I wish I loved Howard with all my heart. Then I shouldn't be observing him, but passionately feeling resentment . . . I wonder how long ago I left off loving him. And have I ever left off loving him at all? He's like my stupid selfish baby, and I'm his mother —inhumanly playing at being just, when I'm only indifferent.

They went into the house, and into the cool room where breakfast was laid; and the only clue there was to the unusual state of affairs lay in Howard's frown. Cherry was perfectly happy, as though mischief and care and temptation were remote from her nature. Yet Marian saw that she was being very mischievous, cruelly sure of her power over Howard.

iv

Howard frowned through the meal, heavily repressing their efforts at talk, and as soon as breakfast was over he went out of the room, closing the door behind him with a firmness that appeared final. His departure was a relief to them all. Even Robert remarked it.

"Well," he said, deliberately. "I think I'll have some more bread. And some more marmalade, if you don't mind, auntie." He had previously refused more coffee, a refusal he now reconsidered. "Somehow I didn't like to have it before. I felt uncle would have . . . wouldn't have liked me to."

He ate with enormous relish.

"You'll be sick," Cherry warned him.

"No," he contradicted. "Anyway, it won't interfere with you. I suppose you're going out walking again, and back again in time for lunch."

Cherry's cheeks were pinker.

"No, I'm not," she said, "I'll stay and play with you, if you like."

It was a successful gibe, for it silenced Robert upon that point at least.

"Funny things, girls," he observed, turning to Marian. "They've got very short tempers, most of them. It's vanity, you know, auntie. They don't like having their legs pulled—being teased, I mean. They 'don't think they like it.' Well, why?"

"They like to be taken seriously," suggested Marian.

"Exactly. Unless they've been naughty. Then they howl about only being little girls, and not knowing and not meaning . . . Etcetera! I'd like people to be able to say E.T.C. I don't know why you should have the trouble of saying words in full."

Cherry, who had evidently been reminded of some celebrated excuse made by herself, was not in a mood to abandon the privilege of retaliation. With heightened colour, but a strange glittering calm, she quietly said:

"You never do say things in full, Robert. You run all your words together. That's why you talk so badly."

"So do you, if it comes to that. And through your nose, too."

Indignant protests arose from his companions.

"Robert! Robert!" remonstrated Marian. "That's most horribly rude."

"Perhaps I was carried a little too far," apologised Robert, unruffled. "But Cherry's so beastly conceited. She's so cock-sure. And the girl's conceit . . . it's incredible!"

"Yes," Cherry startlingly agreed. "It's quite true." In an instant her bright face had clouded. All her native good temper was shown, and her intrinsic modesty. Nevertheless, as Robert had said, she was arrogant.

"She thinks nothing's good enough for her. Oh, I tell you, auntie, I know Cherry most awfully well. You

see, I've known her for years. Don't you let her take you in."

"Don't *listen* to him!" begged Cherry turning eagerly to Marian.

"I'm not! I'm not!" Marian was as eager in reassurance.

"But it's true all the same," admitted Cherry, ruefully. "She's not reliable. She never sticks to anything. She'll be as sweet as syrup one minute, and a tricksy devil the next. She's . . ."

"Let me find it out for myself!" Marian begged. The boy's candour was too disconcerting for her present mood. Her thoughts had gone after Howard. She was wondering where he was, and how she could deal with him. And Robert's warnings were not unheeded, for although she now wanted only to remember the Cherry of her recent understanding there was a hint of such sagacity in what had just been said, and of such admission in the way it had been received, that she could not help wondering how far she could trust Cherry. That Howard was puzzled and resentful she knew. How soon might it not be that she also would feel puzzled and resentful?

With a common impulse they rose from the table. Robert and Cherry were left together while Marian went about the day's housekeeping affairs; and when she returned it was to find Cherry and Howard sitting together on wicker chairs in the slim shadow cast by a wing of the house.

V

That Howard was half-soothed could quickly be seen. He rose when Marian arrived, and brought a third chair so that she could join them; but this action was only a proof of his lesser chagrin, and she could not learn

whether he had attempted any explanation with Cherry or not. She supposed he had expostulated and been received with kindness. More, if indeed there had been so much, she could not discover.

They sat in the shadow, talking or reading, until it was time for the Sinclairs to arrive. Once or twice Howard had risen, and possibly had tried mutely to persuade Cherry to go with him; but upon each occasion he had reseated himself, as the result either of refusal or—more probably—of deliberate blindness, and so their order was unchanged when the sound of the arriving car made itself heard. Then only did they all leave their chairs, so as to greet the visitors.

The Sinclairs came cheerfully into the house and out into the garden, complaining of the heat and the journey, the flies and the sunshine; and Marian, coming last with Nigel, heard Cherry laugh with irrepressible gaiety at Tom Sinclair's description of the morning's ills. Cherry looked back at her with a bright, gleeful face, as though they had been old friends, and Nigel suddenly said, in an almost breathless way:

"I say, isn't she pretty! I didn't notice it yesterday!"

It was so ingenuous that Marian also laughed a little.

"You saw her as your enemy, then," she reminded him. "That makes all the difference."

"I wonder," he said, in a reflective tone. "Does Miss Mant vary much?"

Marian was surprised at his question, that showed a judgment she had hardly expected. Really, these young people were astonishingly hard to assimilate!

"Every minute," she assured him.

"She's been with you, to-day," said Nigel, summarily. "It's a wonderful difference. Didn't you know that you affect everybody?"

"I didn't know, certainly, that I changed their faces," she teased. She stole a side look at him as he walked

by her side. The slim figure was clearly very strong, as she now saw; and while it was not ruddy he had no disagreeable pallor, and the brightness of his eyes and the crispness of his hair were sufficient proof of health. How had she been made to think of him as a young artist? His hair was not short, but many men wore their hair long who made no pretence that they were in anything but business. Indeed, the modern professional artist went almost to the point of having his hair cut brutally short. There was nothing effeminate about Nigel. He was not dreamy, and he had no mannerisms; he spoke with clearness and moved with grace. He was obviously a very fit young man, and if he could make her heart swell by his playing of Chopin that must be one talent among many. He was not simply a pianist and a critic of men, but an athlete and a man of common-sense. For an instant she was timid. He seemed beyond the range of her comprehension. Only, however, for a minute. He resumed, thoughtfully, after another glance at Cherry:

"I think you're very wonderful, you know. Your sympathies are so wide. You can make me feel I'm worth something; and you can make Miss Mant feel she's a real person; and you make my aunt garrulous; and my uncle says you're the only woman in these parts (except my aunt, of course, and different from her). And I can say this to you without feeling impertinent, and I couldn't do that to anybody else—even if I thought it of anybody else."

Marian felt a little hot. She again glanced aside at him, smiling.

"It's because I'm so negative, I expect. If it's true," she added.

"Of course, it's true. And its because you're a positive. . ."

"It's tremendously jolly to have it described," Marian

concluded; but she did not want to continue talking on this subject, because what Nigel had said had made her feel such a start of happiness in her whole being. So they followed the others more closely, and presently came up with them and formed a group, until the distant sound of a gong called them all in to luncheon, gaily talking and full of high spirits that would have made any meal-time pleasant.

vi

Nigel was not the only one of the visitors to be struck with Cherry's appearance, for Mrs. Sinclair quickly commented in an undertone as she entered the room by Marian's side. In a whisper, she expressed her favourable opinion.

"Where did you find her, Marian? She's perfectly charming!"

In reply Marian smiled only: Cherry was too near to allow of any reply. Besides, what was there to say? An echo of the praise, an explanation that Cherry was the daughter of a friend quite unknown to Mrs. Sinclair; and then—what then? Certainly, Marian could not have entered into the details of her own questionings. To have done this would have been to leave her friend gasping and uncomfortable; and as she had not made up her own mind on the subject she could not risk giving an impression which might have to be revised. More, however, was to follow. Katherine Sinclair, cheerful busybody though she might be, was electrifyingly swift in her perceptions.

At the head of the table sat Howard, rubicund but not yet quite composed. There was a frown dawning upon his brow; restless movements of his hands and shoulders betrayed his mental unease. Upon his right Mrs. Sinclair, regarding Cherry with warm and encouraging

pleasure. Cherry was exactly opposite. If she had wanted to know anything about Mrs. Sinclair it appeared that her curiosity had been quickly satisfied, for she took that lady in as one of the party and not as an individual. Beside her sat Tom Sinclair, very rueful in manner but extremely sly and jocose in remark. Upon Marian's left, again, were Robert and Nigel, the latter nearest, and Robert demurely lost between Nigel and Mrs. Sinclair. Marian, from her position, could see all the faces. Each in turn gave her some pleasure, except Howard's; for Howard was preoccupied, and perfunctory in his attentiveness to Mrs. Sinclair's pertinacious volubility. She had never seen him quite like this, for his mouth was drawn into a sternness almost vicious. She had seen him petulant, angry; determined; he had shown himself both weak and obstinate; but this new expression of vengeful pain was until now unknown. It hurt her. Unconsciously, she almost murmured aloud.

"Grotesque . . . it's impossible. Why can't he see that? He's taking it hard, and it's too late for him to take love hard. It's indecent . . ." A later thought, that came as a flash, said "I wonder if I should take it hard at his age! How impossible!" She thought so little of this that she never after remembered it; but she continued to feel that indifferent pity for Howard which had earlier distressed her. She too became perfunctory in attentiveness to her guests.

vii

Howard became at length entirely silent, as if choked by a sense of most intolerable wrongs. Once he met her eyes, and she faintly shook her head, to warn him against obvious moroseness. But Howard was too far gone: his expression blackened, and ugly cruelty showed. His wife, it was clear, was one who must endure his moods.

She must even suffer for the coldness of others. In that moment he looked like a bully, and Marian felt Nigel turn sharply to her as though he had caught the exchange and had resented Howard's response to her pacific entreaty. He was alert and engaging.

"Mrs. Forster," he said, with a smile. "Shall we challenge Miss Mant and your husband to a return match?"

"It would be rather jolly," ventured Marian, knowing well that there would be no such match.

"I'm not playing to-day," Cherry quickly interposed. "I'm too tired."

"Nonsense!" cried Nigel. "I'll never believe it!"

"I'll play you a single." Cherry was defiant.

Howard's jaw was set. He was ostentatiously out-of-temper. He hit roughly.

"If you do, you'll get rolled up," he said, with all the grimness left intact by his anger and chagrin. It was pitiable to see him so little controlled.

Anger surged in its turn to Cherry's face. She could not brook such an attack upon her vanity. All the ugliness of her obstinate nature showed at once. She was in an instant as savage as he. But she kept her tongue silent, and in a moment smiled cruelly at Howard. The smile, in its deliberate indifference, was like the turn of a dagger.

"After lunch?" she asked of Nigel, coolly impudent and defiant.

There was everywhere an understanding that the position was strained. Nigel did not mend matters. He too was obstinate, it appeared. He looked no higher than Cherry's shoulders.

"I'm playing first with Mrs. Forster," he said. "If she'll let me."

The blood ebbed from Cherry's cheeks. The look

in her eyes was that of insensate anger. It was unmistakable. She had ceased to be a child and had become a wanton who would disregard all who stood in her way. The whole of the episode had been distressing as an exhibition of character. It was so bad that the elder Sinclairs were silenced. Their usual volubility was checked. They could only look uncomfortably at each other, and away again. Robert was the one who pointed the moral.

"Jolly good!" he cried, approvingly. "Auntie, I'll come and watch."

"You shall do more," laughed Marian, trembling. "You shall look for the balls when they go into the bushes, Robert. But of course we're all going to play."

The quick flash of grateful response from Cherry was her reward. Only Marian had seen the girl's lip quiver. That this was so was evidenced afterwards, when, at the end of the meal, Mrs. Sinclair stopped for a moment beside Marian as they all moved towards the garden. Cherry was in advance. Howard had disappeared. Tom and Nigel were smoking together. Marian was trying to reach Cherry, and might have done so had she not been detained by her old friend.

"I was wrong," said Mrs. Sinclair. "Did you see that girl's expression?"

"She's very young," pleaded Marian. "Young and self-willed. Besides, the fault wasn't hers. She's very impetuous."

"She's more than that, my dear," persisted Mrs. Sinclair. "She's worse."

"Yes. A great deal more than that . . ." Marian ignored the supplement, and tried by dryness to turn the point of the principal warning.

"I advise you to be careful of her," urged her friend.

Marian turned, smiling. Her face was unreadable. In itself that was a rebuke.

"I think I understand her," she said, gently.

"I wonder. I don't think you do. With your gentle nature I don't think you could."

"You're very uncharitable to Cherry. Over-generous to me."

"No, I'm not. You may think you're going to influence her . . ." It was a shrewd thrust, as Marian would have expected. "Only a man could do that. Mark my words. *You* can't. A man who'd thrash her. Why, can't you see? She's a minx."

Marian breathed quickly. She was far too proud to show her heart.

"I know you're quite wrong," she said soo[illegible] not easy to read. She's easy to misunderstand. [illegible] full of good and evil,—as we all are."

"We're not all minxes, thank goodness," said Mrs. Sinclair. She gave a sharp side-glance, almost suspicious. "At least, I'm not one. I'm not so absolutely sure about you now as I was ten minutes ago."

With a grunt she turned away, ignoring the effect of her own affectionate note on Marian's character. The last sound Marian heard upon that occasion was a brief re-statement of Mrs. Sinclair's position.

"Minx," muttered the aunt of Nigel. "And perhaps something more."

Marian shivered. If Cherry were again off her guard she might break a friendship. Strange that this defensive situation should have arisen, when Marian's own feelings were so little based upon confidence, but only upon some instinctive hope. She was believing loyally in Cherry against all the evidence of Cherry's nature as it had been revealed in action.

"Supposing she *is*?" Marian asked herself. "What am I to do?"

CHAPTER XI: THE FLIGHT

i

THE difficult afternoon went. A Sunday, almost equally difficult through the prolonged constraint of Howard, followed it. Howard was markedly reckless. He gave no explanation of his towering silence, leaving Marian to construe as she might. His speeches were few and gruff; his exchanges with the two women were brusque to roughness. No longer did he beseech Cherry. And yet, as Marian saw, he was very alert for some softening on her part. He listened with unwilling intentness to everything she said, ignoring it with a determination that made him like a stupid hobbledehoy.

Cherry was mischievously demure, frightened, cold to perfection; and only by her unobtrusive shadowing of Marian did she show that she was in desperate need of help. She was frightened, but unrepentant and ruthless. Was that to last? Marian puzzled over the problem at intervals. If she had believed wholly in Cherry she would have thought a break deliberately resolved upon; but with the new doubt suggested by Mrs. Sinclair she was half-ready to believe all this coldness but a new move in the game of dominating Howard's nature. Did Cherry want power? Was she going straight? All Marian's cleverness could not solve the riddle.

For herself, Marian was only watchful and superficially calm. Her brain ached, so tried was it in the rapidity of all her intuitions and guesses. A sense of the complexity of a girl's mind—not yet arrived at the simplification of maturer years—oppressed her. The

truth, she thought, might lie in the immeasurable variety of Cherry's inclinations. Very likely the girl herself did not understand her own actions and impulses. She was probably following them with blind recklessness, so self-absorbed as to ignore every consequence, every possibility of misconstruction. It is the cruellest thing in all the all cruelty of the young that it is all so unconsidered.

ii

There was no attempt, all that day, at any intimate talk. When they were together, Marian and Cherry kept as far as they could from any personal topic; and often they were entirely silent. In both speculation was so busy that they had no power to communicate. The day passed, uncomfortable and cheerless. Only the outer world abated none of its energetic exercise. There all was at full pressure, an ironic contrast to the discord of those within, and a comment upon the secrecy of human sorrow.

In the morning Blanche, in bringing Marian's tray, announced that Howard had left for London by the early morning train. Blanche added that he had gone because of "important business."

iii

Marian's first thought was, "What a coward!" Then immediately, "Or what a tactician?" She lay quite still when Blanche had gone, and laughed softly. There was bound to be a comic element in the breakfast scene which was to follow. She imagined it as she sipped her tea. Then her heart chilled.

"It's horrible!" she cried, passionately. "Horrible! And I'm as much ashamed of myself as I am of them. They're foolish . . . stupid and ugly . . . But I'm worse, because I'm cold. Yes, I'm hard and cold and vindictive."

But she was not cold.

Later still, trying to solve her sense of being a spectator, and of failing to hate Cherry, Marian fell into a curious notion. She realised quite suddenly that the reason she did not hate Cherry and condemn her and send her away was that in some way she felt responsible for Cherry. It was as though Cherry had been her daughter. Still, after thirty-eight years of life, Marian believed in the power of love, the protective and pervasive power of love. She had not yet tired of giving. She did not hold level the scales of gifts and returns. She was that rarest and most tragic of human creatures, the almost disinterested giver. Without plan of any kind, she had an instinct that forbade her to abandon Cherry at this crucial moment. She was not moved or sentimental: she had a sense of consequences. And she had a belief in human nature—even in the nature of a young girl playing so perilously with passion and the inclination to take risks with life. That alone was the explanation of her coolness in handling the situation.

iv

When they were seated it became clear that the breakfast-table was laid for three only. Marian was beginning her explanation just as Cherry noticed the significant fact.

"Why, there's no place . . ."

"Like home!" interposed Robert, electrically.

"Howard went to London by the early train."

Cherry started. Her head was lowered. Marian imagined that her heart was beating fast. When she spoke, her artificially natural voice trembled.

"Rather unexpected, isn't it?" she asked. "Did you know?"

"Not until this morning. Some urgent business."

Cherry's shrewd knowledge of the postal delivery—the Monday morning blank—was indicated. She knew that Howard could not have been unexpectedly summoned to town. Marian could almost see the thought fly through her brain, for a shadow fell across her face, so quick that it was barely perceptible. Marian would have missed it had she been unprepared. She wondered how much Cherry thought she might know of the affair and its progress. The girl was behaving—or trying to behave—as though this was a matter unconnected with herself. That was absurd. Those were absurd tactics. Did she think Marian knew nothing, or everything by instinct, or did she suppose Marian to be groping among mere nervous apprehensions for the cause of Howard's gloom and his sudden departure? If so, she was falling into her old trick of under-rating the intelligence of her associates. If one didn't know the facts, there was bound to be a fine web of supposition in the feminine mind. And Cherry could only guess blindly after Marian's knowledge. How much, unaided, could Cherry perceive? That was a puzzle. All the same, Marian felt pleasantly mistress of the situation. After all, she did know much more of what had happened than Cherry could quite follow. The scene in the wood had been an essential fact. Cherry did not know that Marian knew of that scene. She did not know how much she might have inferred from Howard's blunderingly wounded manner. How troublesome Cherry's doubts must be to her! She must be perfectly at a loss; but she was as swift and probing as a child, and as adept at concealing her penetrations. It was exciting!

With a small laugh, intended perhaps to establish incredible ignorance, Cherry added:

"Aren't men funny! I wonder why he didn't tell us he was going."

"I expect he'll be back to-night," suggested Marian, suavely.

A roguish smile of greater sagacity appeared upon Cherry's face.

V

For the rest of the day she was charming. Without the least air of scheme, she was like a delightful baby, caressing and tender. She talked with animation, sang a little—songs Marian did not know, which required a slightly American accent and a singular variability of time until then unfamiliar to Marian's ears;—and showed great vitality in small helpful tasks. In the afternoon they played tennis together, and Marian, bereft of Nigel's inspiration, lost the sett after a good fight. Cherry was delighted. She laughed exultantly, flushed and happy. In all this there was no sign of the least vicious desire for triumph, but only the exhilaration of the victor. She was captivating.

In the evening they strolled together in the garden, and it was Marian's turn to talk. She spoke of her young days, and Cherry listened eagerly. No mention other than casual was made of Howard by either of them. He had disappeared from the scene; and it was filled only by a sense of mutual confidence. Both were playing parts, concealing all their intuitions regarding each other; but neither was doing it with effort or hostility, for it was as though both recognised the same convention.

Marian went to bed happy. She knew that Cherry's day had been blithe and untroubled; and for herself the same could be said, because the cause of their constraint was absent. With Howard away Cherry talked well and intelligently. She was clearly a girl with thoughts of her own and a power to express them. She was for the whole day all that Marian could have wished—eager

and fresh and apparently candid. Wholly candid, it might have appeared, except upon one subject. It did not arise. They were content that Howard should not be mentioned.

When, once, Marian referred to Nigel, Cherry said:

"Yes. He's a nice man. I think he's nice."

"He plays very well—I mean, he's a musician."

There was nothing in return but a polite expression of interest. No surprise, no pleasure. Cherry, then, was not musical. That was a power that did not appeal to her. If she had not had proof to the contrary, Marian would have supposed her merely a frank, athletic girl. She went on:

"He's also an idealist, which is rather a notable thing in a young man."

"It *is*," agreed Cherry, with emphasis. She spoke as a specialist, as Marian could not fail to observe. "What d'you mean?"

Marian sketched some of Nigel's interests as they had been revealed in the two conversations. She enlarged upon his naïveté.

"His age varies every minute," she explained, laughing.

"Like mine . . . You know him pretty well, don't you?" Cherry asked, shrewdly.

"No, no . . ."

"Well, you understand him."

"I certainly like him."

They talked no more of Nigel.

At ten o'clock they went to bed, happily tired. As they lighted their candles in the hall Cherry looked at Marian with her frank expression of liking. She smiled a little. They seemed beautifully intimate. It appeared as though she could not resist the slight impulse to egotism that was recurrent in her talk.

"You know," she said, in a moved voice. "You're most awfully good to me. I'm such a . . . such an ungrateful pig . . ." When she saw there was nothing but kindness in Marian's speechlessness, her eyes suddenly glowed. "You're a brick," she murmured. Then, sober and abrupt: "Good night."

In the staring light of the candle she went up the stairs as if she were dreaming, a slender child without any impulse that was not wholly innocent.

Marian followed slowly, deep in reverie that was unconscious of its own implications. When she was in her own room she stood for a moment, still unthinking. But as she put her candle down the reverie produced a startling conclusion.

"I wonder," she said, in a low tone. "I just *wonder*."

BOOK TWO: NIGEL

CHAPTER I: HOWARD'S RETURN

i

HOWARD did not write to Marian to explain his departure or to announce his return. He was away all the week. The inexplicable silence provoked a slight constraint between Marian and Cherry; but for the most part their friendship improved during the week. They several times played tennis; they walked together; they sat and talked. For Marian, apart from the one forbidden topic, it was a week of genuine relaxation. Cherry was a charming companion. She talked well when alone, and she had a number of opinions upon matters of social and human interest which showed her to be both shrewd and observant. Occasionally it seemed to Marian that these opinions might have been derived from older persons—it became clear that she had no girl-friends of her own age, but only a few acquaintances among older people;—but they were often both consistent and characteristic. She was old for her years, but unequal in her knowledges. She referred familiarly to people well known in the arts, and her views upon them were vigorous, if not always well founded. Her ambitions were boundless. They ranged from political eminence to a countrified retirement which it was clear she would in reality find insupportable. Marian took delight in such peeps into an alert mind. At times she thought Cherry's ambitions not outside the range of her abilities. She was confirmed in her admiration for the girl.

There was, however, a reverse side to Cherry's revelations which gave her less pleasure. Unconsciously she

gave indications of hardness. There was in some of her attitudes a quite definite sophistication. She was still touched by that modern brand of sophistication which lies in the adoration of pleasure. Her notions of life were still those which an ardent nature might derive from the amenities of musical comedy and riverside flirtation. She still saw herself as the heroic mistress of a distinguished man rather than as the affectionate wife and companion of a good man. To Marian this was a perverse and unenjoyable attitude because it took little account of any permanent relation or sense of responsibility or permanent happiness. Marian every now and then received little shocks of distaste—not moral shocks, but slight feelings of irritation at ambitions metallic in their shallow ignorance of the rewards of virtue. The faintest protest at once caused a leap of rebellious anger in Cherry's eyes, a harshness and defiance in her voice. She was intolerant of continence as a rule of life. She still saw existence too much from the point of view of the self-indulgent child; and this, while it made Marian tenfold more anxious that Cherry should benefit from wise counsel, at times alienated her sympathy. It provided her with many absorbing problems, which she revolved at length in her cool judgment. More and more she realised that to control Cherry would be a strong man's lifelong task. The knowledge saddened her. With such loveliness, and with so much true innocence, Cherry might yet from sheer self-love and self-will, from a kind of base conceitedness, wreck her own happiness and the happiness of others. It was clear that a discovered weakness in another person would always leave her childishly and cruelly triumphant. Marian often shook her head at that perception. Would Cherry ever find a partner so understanding as to appreciate her, and so virile as to dominate her imperfect moral sense? Were

there people in the world who combined unselfishness with strong will? That, it seemed to Marian, was the simplification of the whole affair; and at present Cherry was too much at the mercy of her impulses and too much disposed to regard these as the sufficient warrant for her conduct.

Of her own power for good she occasionally felt doubtful. For one thing she had neither the time nor the opportunity for controlling Cherry. Marian was extremely human in many ways; but she suffered from that power of cold cruelty which persons of self-control at times exhibit. She knew that if Cherry failed her she herself would find it hard to resist the impulse to punish inexorably. More than once, turning the matter over in her mind, she washed her hands of the girl. "No, no. It's not worth it. It's not in the least worth it. One might go on endlessly and at the last be disappointed by some stupidity" she said. "Not the stupidity of the dull but the horrible obtuseness of a selfish girl sworn to the pursuit of her own objects." And immediately afterwards, like a true woman, Marian would see her duty plain, and return to her essential philosophy, that love was never lost, but always produced at least a semblance of return for its bestowal. How strange that she would be full of Cherry, and absorbed in the desire for a wise development of the girl's character! When she was aware of this she felt very old and mature; but perhaps not very confident of the potence of her disinterested wish for Cherry's happiness. She found herself repeating a long-remembered phrase: "We are betrayed by what is false within." Was the base element in Cherry's nature even susceptible to outside influence? Or would it at last dominate her whole character? Who could tell?

ii

The week passed. Few letters came to the house; and as far as Marian knew there never came a letter for Cherry. Until Thursday, when a note from Alice Mant to herself announced that she wanted her children back, as they were all going early in the following week to Somerset, for three weeks' bathing and holiday-making. Tom, she said, had found suddenly that he must have a change, and could spare the time for it. Accordingly, would Marian please forgive such short notice and send the children home on Friday?

At once Marian flew into a suspicion. Had Cherry written to her mother demanding to be recalled? Alice's letter seemed to dispose of that notion. And yet? It was strange. What was in the child's mind? Was this a further manœuvre for Howard's discomfiture? Or was it all genuine, and was Marian herself a beast for her suspicion? The doubt was too hard to solve. How much of an actress was Cherry?

What, too, would Howard do and say upon his return?

iii

On Friday she was alone. The two Mants had caught the late morning train, and were on their way, after a parting of great warmth. They had both seemed sorry to go, and yet both had looked forward rather exultingly to the holiday in store. Of course, as Robert pointed out, it "stashed up" his plan for going to his school-fellow's; but the prospect of bathing and picnicking with his father, whom he loved and revered, was a very joyous one. Cherry remained inscrutable. She had become silent and thoughtful. Marian would have supposed her unmoved if it had not been that she behaved so affectionately at the last, with a sort of caressing grace that could

not have been assumed. Marian could not fail to believe that love had been given to herself. When the train started the girl, still not speaking, had directed a long, candid, and reassuring glance at Marian. Then she had been lost to sight. Two arms—one of them Robert's—alone projected from the carriage window, waving farewell, until the train was like a caterpillar far down the glittering line.

And then Marian, returning home, had found the house lonely. She had walked from room to room, feeling deserted and a little heartsick. She had smiled at a thousand recollections, and frowned at a thousand more. And she was still uncertain about Cherry. The week had been too short. It was too short for the discovery of any genuine truth about a young girl's nature, unless that girl were the simplest of creatures.

"Of course," Marian said to herself. "I don't like simple creatures. I don't like 'nice' girls, because there's nothing on earth nastier than the really 'nice' girl. All the same, I wish Cherry were a bit . . . What is it I want her to be?" She was for that moment filled with a subtle suspicion of the hitherto-unquestioned disinterestedness of her own wishes. "Do I really want her to be more . . . stable; or just . . . more tractable? I don't know. How detached am I? Is any woman—any person—really capable of seeing another with detachment? I should have thought, only I! I don't believe anybody could know." The horrible indifference which she dreaded paid her a passing visit. She added:

"And after all, why *should* I bother?"

A telegram from Howard reached her an hour later, asking that the car should be sent to meet the evening train. Marian laughed faintly as she read it, and was then again grave.

iv

Pity made her withdraw as the sound of the car announced its return; but she came down a few moments afterwards, and waited for Howard in the drawing-room. She was not unmoved. Far from unmoved. Her heart was soft with pity for poor human creatures, living in such futile agonies. It appeared to her that she was feeling the whole situation with new intensity, and her part was difficult to play. The turn of events and of Howard's bearing must determine her own conduct towards him.

Soon he too came into the silent room, and stood by the door. Apparently he expected the others to be there, for he looked quickly round. To Marian it seemed that he must, as she was doing, feel the emptiness of the house; but his sensitiveness was less than hers. With an impulsive wish to end his uncertainty, she greeted him.

"Hullo, Howard," she said, quietly. "I'm all alone. Alice demanded the children back. They went this morning."

He paled. A great frown, accusing in its direction towards herself, showed upon his brow.

"Went!" he cried. Then, harshly, as though he comprehended the part she had played in this blow: "Oh, I see."

"I was sorry. Alice and Tom . . ." The gong sounded. "I'll explain in the other room." She moved towards the door; and as they entered the dining-room began again. "It seems Tom is run down, so they are all to go to Somersetshire for a holiday. We only had a day's notice. It was sudden."

Still he was firmly believing that Cherry had been sent away.

"I see," he morosely said.

Marian could see nothing but his tired face, the baggy puffs below his eyes. He looked haggard, weary and melancholy. And he disliked her. She had no triumph, but only a feeling of sadness that she did not love him more.

"I've felt very lonely all day since they went," she went on, forcing herself to speak in a tone of lightness. "They're such nice children. Both quite childish, of course—even Cherry . . . I suppose you couldn't get back before. We've had a very quiet week. I've seen nothing at all of the Sinclairs—not even the young man has been over."

"Oh, *that* cub!" muttered Howard, half to himself.

Marian's brows arched themselves. Why should he feel hostility? Instantly her memory responded. Nigel had been the instrument of the tennis failure. Of course, he was hateful to Howard. She had been tactless. She shook her head in self-rebuke. It had been a mistake.

"You've been busy?" she ventured.

"Yes, yes . . ." He was lost in thought. Marian felt Blanche's observation of the scene, and was glad when they were once more alone. It was bad enough to have a difficult situation to deal with; it became much worse when one was under the scrutiny of a third person who would guess hard and report details of Howard's surliness. She crumbled her bread, seeking inspiration. It did not come. She was tongue-tied, as he was. It was not enough to be appreciative of his feelings; to carry the evening successfully through she would need some inventive power not yet vouchsafed. Stealthily Marian looked at him through the flowers. For a moment his lids were lowered; but she had just time to avert her glance as he sent a look of almost malignant hatred

in her direction. Had she not been steeled, it would have hurt her.

"I see they're going to have a great book fair at Leipzig. At least, I suppose its open already. I should rather like to go. I suppose we couldn't run across to Germany and have a look at it?" She tried to talk of the first thing that she could form phrases upon.

Howard cleared his throat.

"What absurdity!" he cried, with vehemence. "A ridiculous book exhibition!"

"I think it's not only books. An international exhibition of fine arts . . ."

"I wouldn't go to Germany for a thousand pounds," growled Howard, moving his hands restlessly upon the table. "I don't *want* to go. I want to stay here."

"I'm sorry, Howard." It was a reproach, rather than an apology; as they both knew. "I suppose I'm getting restless. It's the modern disease, you know. I've got a great wish to travel. You see, I've been here for a good many weeks. It's two months before we go to London; and you know how . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Howard almost shouted. Marian felt a sudden rush of indignation. Her heart began to thump. Her face became cold, and her eyes darkened. She said nothing, while Howard, ashamed of himself, ate gloomily and without appetite.

V

Immediately after dinner Marian found Alice Mant's letter and put it into Howard's hand without explaining what it was or why she had given it to him. She knew the letter was too crude in expression to do anything but clear herself and explain the departure of Cherry. Their evening was spent apart. Howard disappeared, after reading the letter and returning it to her in silence, and Marian did some sewing. She was wondering at

herself, and at her own stupidity at dinner. Rather warmly, she asked herself—or the wise world—a pointed question. She ejaculated impulsively:

"How *does* one behave at table when one's husband makes a fool of himself, and when one isn't in the least jealous or anxious about it?"

She then smiled mischievously at the trust of Cherry implied in this speech. How funny! She *did* trust Cherry. And she at the same time didn't trust her a bit. What an anomaly! The human heart was a wonderful thing, past understanding.

At ten o'clock she was folding her needlework when Howard came back into the room. She looked up at him as he entered, and was rising when he came nearer and put his arm round her.

"Sorry I was snappy at dinner," he said. "Didn't mean it. I'm fagged out. I'll go to bed."

"Poor old chap." Marian kissed his cheek.

"I'm deadly miserable, old girl." His husky voice was part of the warm tobacco-scented breath upon her face. She turned to him again, immediately responsive.

"I know." It was murmured, a caress.

They said no more. Marian went to bed without any further glance or interchange of feeling, but only a quiet good night that for a time re-established some degree of intimacy between them.

CHAPTER II: PRELUDE

i

THEIR life during the next day was in a studiously minor key. There was no need for them to speak at all. Marian knew that Howard realised her sympathy with his pain; she wished nothing more. And it did not require verbal expression. They met to separate again. He withdrew to his room, and then went out-of-doors; while she, once her ordinary work was finished, became busy in the garden, picking flowers for the house and cutting away the withering roses of yesterday. Later, she went indoors and arranged the flowers, changed her dress, and was downstairs again long before lunch was ready.

"What a useless life I lead!" she thought. "I wish I did something. I've been idle for so many years, without noticing how idle I was. I suppose Cherry's energy has made me envious . . ."

She was thinking that, when she heard the sound of Nigel's car; and she went to meet him as he arrived, a delightful gladness pervading her at the prospect of relief from thoughts so profitless. Nigel jumped from his place and took her hand.

"Mrs. Forster," he said, "I ought to apologise for coming at such a time."

"It's perfectly Spartan of you to come at all. You'll stay to lunch?"

"May I? I hoped you'd ask me."

"It's splendid. And I hoped you would come to-day."

"Did you really?" His expression became radiant. "D'you know I've got hundreds of things I want to say to you."

He was so boyish that she laughed outright, a new thrill in her voice at such palpable liking, and such a frank admission of it.

"But there won't be time for them all!" she cried. "You shouldn't have let them accumulate so."

"I haven't dared to come before. We were here a week ago."

"Every day's a week—in the country, and when one's alone."

"You're alone?" She wondered at his voice, at the pleasure in it.

"My husband only came back yesterday. And my visitors left yesterday. How are Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair?"

"They never change. They're fixed in good spirits. It's quite monotonous. But I'd really have come before . . . only . . . Well, I thought perhaps you'd rather I didn't."

"How silly!" Marian could not resist the temptation to arch familiarity. "You won't ever think that again will you?"

She turned to him, laughing, and saw his bright eyes and his eagerness, and was filled again with the sense of her liking for him. Of his liking for her, also. She was so grateful for that! It gave her a new interest.

"You're not saying that . . ." stammered Nigel.

"Why should I?" Are you so unwelcome wherever you go?" There was the smallest pause. "I don't see very many people, you must remember. This isn't London, where visiting is a daily . . . task."

"Task?" He caught quickly at the word.

"Where the receiving of visits . . ." It was Marian's turn to hesitate, so happy she was in his wish to please her. "Where it's . . . well, less of an event, at any rate."

"You're so good," said Nigel, slightly flushing.

Marian became graver. She thought: "He's such a

boy!" But she was a little moved; and very glad to see him; and relieved to know somebody who seemed candid and ingenuous. She did not realise at all how much, or how little, warmth may mean at early meetings. She was only conscious of a new sense in herself of alert vitality.

ii

They were still talking when the luncheon bell rang. Howard had not returned from his walk, and she knew that he might either come in late or stay away altogether, having his lunch at a wayside inn. They went, therefore, to lunch alone, Nigel sitting upon her right hand, perfectly at ease, and full of energy. She had a thousand glimpses of his dark face and his expressive smile and glance. She had never seen anybody quicker than he in response to the smallest change of mood. Again Marian was struck by his handsomeness and his excellent carriage.

"We'd better begin with the very first thing you wanted to say," she teased.

"Oh, no! The first twenty things must go by the board. They were provisional," he answered, with equal raillery. "They were like a baby's first attempts to walk—mere totterings. Besides, many of them have answered themselves. I know a man who says that any letter left unanswered for a month does that . . ."

"Then I suppose a question unanswered for a week . . ."

"Many times over."

"It all sounds splendid . . . to me. But you know that I can't help being most distressingly curious."

"Haven't you wanted to ask me anything?" He was encouraged to daring. Demurely, Marian dashed his courage to the ground.

"I've been so busy," she said.

"Well, I haven't been idle. My thoughts have kept me busy."

"But then you're younger than I am," urged Marian, stung to fresh teasing. "You haven't as much to occupy your attention."

A gravity came into Nigel's face.

"I wonder exactly what age is," he said. "Does anybody ever know? I seem to vary every hour. I suppose you mean you think I'm very young? Well, I *am* young; but not quite altogether callow. Did you think that?"

"Never!" stoutly declared Marian. "How could I think that?" They both laughed. "I know one isn't mistress of one's thoughts . . ." she continued.

"The modern psychologists seem to say it's only one's dreams that are free," suggested Nigel. "I mean, free from inhibitions."

"You don't mean to say that you bother about the modern psychologists?" she questioned, very quickly. "They're only a sign of modern self-consciousness. And a cause of it, too. I'm coming to the conclusion that all the pseudo-science our young people are getting hold of is darkening their lives and making them distrust their own nature."

Nigel responded immediately to that suggestion. He looked at her with interest.

"I like to hear you say that," he claimed. "I think it's true. If one begins to believe in psycho-analysis, and to apply it to one's self, it's most terribly corrosive and destructive. One thinks of one's self as a merely preying monster. It's impossible to get any peace of mind at all."

They nodded in pleasant agreement.

"This is very nice," said Marian. "Psycho-analysis isn't really scientific, I think. It isn't just genuinely

simple analysis, but a pretentious hybrid. It's ridden by a great fear of human nature."

"You're not afraid of human nature?"

"Are you?"

"A little. Yes, I am, a little. I never know what's coming out of the bag."

"It's generally a cat," said Marian. "I'm not really frightened of human nature. I *am* very much afraid of the twisting of the human mind. It's so delicate. I see so much distrust—self-distrust as well as distrust of others and their motives—that I grieve over the multiplication of what I believe are called complexes. You see, if you get a mind half-formed, and throw in a bit of dust—a preoccupation—you distort everything, or you see it becoming distorted; because the half-formed mind takes a new idea and tries to . . . something more than assimilate it. It tries to make the bit of dust explain everything it doesn't understand. Well, I don't see how one *can* understand everything."

"No. Not even one's self."

"One's self least of all. I've seen a lot of ignorant children making themselves ill over self-interpretation. It's horrid. D'you know what happens?"

"No." He was leaning towards her, absorbed in her disquisition, sharply interested and critical, but also extremely receptive. Delighted by his attention, Marian explained.

"They get afraid of their own impulses. They sophisticate them. They make themselves ill. They try to escape—from sheer nervous reaction. They turn to other people—charlatans—who take advantage of their silly credulity; or they turn religious; or they get suicidal. You'll find that among modern people, half-educated, suicide through *weltschmerz* will increase to a terrifying degree. I'm really serious in this."

"I'm sure you are," said Nigel, warmly. "I don't disagree with you at all. I think what you say is true. At least, I see the danger."

"Of course, nothing is universal," she agreed. "And of course it is all really rather fascinating. I mean, the discussion of character and the influence of ideas, and so on. I admit that it fascinates me."

"And me," said Nigel. "Don't you think it needs a good deal of courage to keep clear-headed?"

"Or a good deal of obtuseness."

"Or, I suppose, indifference."

"Well, we all suffer from that," Marian assured him. "It's a sin."

They both laughed again, because neither had been talking with undue solemnity; and in such warm interchange of glances it was impossible for them not to feel that their new friendship had been cemented by a kind of intellectual propinquity.

iii

After luncheon they went out into the garden and walked slowly about, enjoying the afternoon's beauty and the beauty of the general flowery prospect. The great trees by which, at a small distance, the house was partly surrounded were softly murmuring and swaying under the touch of the summer breeze. It was exquisite to look along the channels of green that were everywhere broken and decorated by some lovely contrast, some flame of colour, red and blue and white. In the heat of the day, tempered though it was by a wind from the east, the whole garden looked radiant; and both Marian and Nigel were content to wander without purpose. Unknowingly they turned in unison by instinct, and stopped and moved on again in perfect harmony.

"Did your visitors enjoy being here?" Nigel asked at length. Marian, brought from her state of thoughtless ease, was for a moment incapable of realising his question.

"Enjoy! Oh, Cherry and Robert: yes, I think they were rather sorry to go. But they were sent for. Mr. and Mrs. Mant were going away."

"Oh, yes." Neither was inclined to pursue this subject. Marian felt the strongest wish that he should not proceed farther. She knew that Mrs. Sinclair must have declared herself at the family table on the subject of Cherry. And, even in the midst of her still unresolved questionings about Cherry, Marian felt that she knew more about the girl than the Sinclairs could do. For a moment, therefore, she was shy.

"You're having a good holiday yourself, aren't you?" she ventured.

"Wonderful. I've been overdoing it with work, lately. I'm all on edge. My eyes have been troubling me; and altogether I've been needing a rest . . ."

"Your eyes? How wretched!"

"Nothing serious. But I've been working hard."

"What sort of work?"

"In my father's office. I'm only there for a time. I want to go in for literature; but I promised to help him for a year or two. He's just a merchant."

"Literature!" said Marian. "How does one 'go in' for that?"

Nigel laughed at the phrase, which had struck Marian as ludicrous.

"Well, I can tell you that I'm going the wrong way," he said, half-seriously. "I'm trying to learn things out of books."

Marian, still amused, pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I thought it was a hobby," she said.

"How *terrible* of you! I don't believe you! It needs absolute devotion."

"Really!" She pretended to think a moment. "Now I understand why good writers . . . I suppose there *are* good writers?"

"None," he answered, firmly.

"Oh, Mr. Sinclair!"

"None," repeated Nigel. "That's why I'm going to be one. I'm going to show what can be done by devotion."

"And talent, I'm sure."

"I think so," he said, flushing. "You mustn't misunderstand me."

"I don't."

Nigel looked at her in his searching way.

"No," he said. "You don't misunderstand people. Shall I tell you why?"

"Don't tell me about myself. Put it in general terms. Tell me why some people understand more than others—or at least don't misunderstand."

"You're snubbing me." He was for an instant suspicious of her. He was still young enough to be serious about his own knowledge.

"And you say I don't misunderstand you?" she murmured. His face at once changed, and he laughed again.

"Forgive me," he begged. "Well, we'll say—people . . . People understand because . . . This is so profound that I've forgotten what it is. Do let me say—you! It's so much easier. You don't misunderstand because you haven't any jealousy in your temperament."

"Oho!" Marian shook her head, reproachfully. "That's a dreadful give-away."

"Because you're honest," he persisted. "And . . . I should like to know about blood-pressure," he naïvely concluded. It was too much for Marian. "I know it sounds funny," resumed Nigel, rather red, but unshaken. "I meant it to. I'm not such a fool . . . No, no. Forgive me again. I see I'm blundering all the time."

"I'm afraid you are. I'll tell you why I sometimes don't misunderstand. It's really very simple, and not a virtue. It's only that I'm extremely interested. When a thing is said to me I listen to it—really listen. As for jealousy—you don't know me. I'm very jealous. But I try not to be, and I try not to show it."

He had listened with attention, and had nodded once. But he protested against her admission of jealousy. It made him eager.

"You don't measure yourself with others," he said.

"You don't know me well enough. I'm secretly very arrogant."

"You may be that," he agreed. "I think you must have great pride. But just because of that, you don't measure yourself with others."

Marian put her fingers lightly upon his arm.

"I'm past the age at which a sensible woman minds feeling inferior," she said, gently. "I've grown used to my own limitations. But you know you'd have done far better to keep to impersonal general statements. We're all egotists."

"Except you," cried Nigel, impulsively. He had touched her fingers with his own hand, in emphasis. He was looking directly into her face. And at that instant Marian, glancing past him, saw that they had been approaching the little wood at the end of the garden, and that Howard was standing just inside the wood, watching them.

CHAPTER III: POLITICS

i

ONLY for a moment did the sudden appearance of Howard embarrass Marian.

"Oh, there's my husband," she said, and nodded and smiled in the direction of the wood. Howard stepped from it and came towards them. "You've had your lunch, I expect," she continued, as the two men shook hands. "We didn't wait. Mr. Sinclair very nobly came over just before lunch." In speaking, she took in the details of Howard's appearance, and his slightly incredulous stare at herself; but she gave no sign of the mild amusement she felt at his watchfulness. Howard made some reply, which was inaudible; and then he announced that he was going to have a bath. Perspiration showed in the lines about his eyes. He looked worn and jaded. He passed them on his way to the house. The moment he was out of earshot, Nigel said:

"Surely your husband's ill, Mrs. Forster. He looks ill."

"He's been all the week in town," she explained, hoping he would believe her. "It must be very tiring. He's been working hard. And Howard's really a country man. His happiness is all in the country. He must have missed the exercise he gets here."

But to herself Marian was thinking: His happiness is lost now. He wants distraction—society. And how am I to get him that? It would be far better if I could persuade him to come abroad. I must try again. This is going to be insupportable, if it goes on.

"I'm sorry he's run down," observed Nigel.

Marian wondered how perceptive he really was. She made no reply, and they continued to stroll about the garden, not speaking.

"D'you know we're expecting a swarm of bees?" she said at length. "And have you ever seen such a thing?"

"Never. I should like to." He was instantly vivacious again.

"You must come over to see us very very soon; and then we must try and give you an entertainment. It's very interesting—and very exhausting in this hot weather. I think that with July we shall find the heat more trying than it has been. There won't be this delicious breeze; and we shall all feel very limp and helpless. All the same, don't you think the summer is by far the most lovely season of the year?"

"The early summer, yes," he agreed. "Not the late summer."

"You mean September?" Marian asked.

"The freshness has gone—the attractiveness."

"I suppose so." Marian sighed at the thought of the summer's eventual decline. "But it's less melancholy than the autumn. And less bleak . . ."

"It's very near to autumn," said Nigel, rather gloomily.

At his hollow tone Marian drew herself a little apart from her guest. His words had chilled her. It was extraordinary how unwelcome was the emotion evoked by Nigel's speech.

"Every season has its beauties," she faintly protested. "The late summer as well as the early. It's less the time of bloom and promise, I agree; but it's the time of fruition."

Nigel pondered.

"Yes," he said, unconsciously applying her protest.

"I don't expect I can be fair to it. I suppose bloom and promise still mean so much to me. I'm still too sentimental to view fulfilment as beautiful. It's wrong, I can see."

"Even old age has its charm," responded Marian, drily. But a sad feeling of unease stole upon her; and both thereafter became thoughtful.

ii

Howard met them at tea, which was a silent meal. All three had many things to turn over in their minds. The two men, in particular, had no common ground, for Howard was essentially a man of affairs, and Nigel, when he had no sense of temperamental interplay, was inclined to fall into speechlessness. To Marian, sitting between them, it appeared that Nigel was by far the more intriguing. She even liked his silence, which was not that of apathy; and she read into it upon this occasion a flattery the more grateful because it was unconscious. She had peeped into a mind very quick in its responses. She was piqued with curiosity as to what was withheld. It was not as though Nigel gave himself to all comers: he clearly needed a genuine companion before he could conquer his natural self-control. That alone would have warmed her heart; but when she could remember his recent outrunning to her own thoughts the throbbing knowledge of power to affect his sensitive nature was all the more pleasant. She found herself speculating deeply into the resources of his mind. For the first time she was aware that she too had questions to ask. Her interest in him was strongly aroused. Already she felt the pleasant glow that comes of curiosity regarding an unfamiliar personality. All this was heightened by his present reserve, which was reserve in face of a third person unsusceptible to the question with which his intimate thoughts were

concerned. Pride in his instinctive deference to her own perceptiveness was keen and sweet. She looked at him with a liking which had increased as the result of their colloquy. Her eyes rested upon his face, absorbing the mobile mouth, the slightly-roughened hair, the clean outline of the face itself. Her breath came more quickly, and she slowly withdrew her glance and directed it elsewhere. For a moment Marian was in a dream.

"Are you staying much longer in Suffolk, Mr. Sinclair?" she presently asked.

Nigel started, as though his thoughts also had been preoccupied.

"A fortnight," he said. "Possibly three weeks. Then I go back to London. I shall certainly be there by the beginning of August."

"You may go on somewhere else?"

"Yes. To some friends in Hampshire."

Howard stirred himself. He looked with a half-frown across the table.

"Don't you find it very dead-and-alive down here?" he demanded. "I should have thought a young fellow like you . . ."

"Mr. Sinclair has been ill," interposed Marian. "He's having a thorough rest."

"I see. I was thinking sea air, and bathing . . . The country's all very well for older people. For you and me, we'll say. And his uncle and aunt."

Howard did not look at Marian as he spoke. Marian, looking involuntarily at Nigel, saw him wince and colour.

"But Mrs. Forster's not . . ." He stopped abruptly, and instantly resumed: "*Do* you find it dull here?" The question was for Marian. "I shouldn't think you were ever dull."

"I'm very rarely dull," she acknowledged. How strangely her voice sounded! It held a pain that she

was unconscious of feeling. She too had been wounded by Howard's speech, but, it seemed, impersonally.

"I've had a good deal of the other kind of activity," Nigel explained, turning back to Howard, and surveying him, Marian thought, with a thin shadow of arrogance. Howard grunted in acquiescence. "It's not the only possible relaxation."

"I thought it was," Howard said, "for young men." He looked down at his boots.

Really, there was no need for Howard to be so boorish in the indication of his lack of interest in Nigel! Marian had never previously felt the discomfort of having a friend of whose intimacy Howard disapproved. That peculiar difficulty of married life had been hitherto non-existent. And Howard's friends . . . she had always supposed that a husband's friends were "different," unless he introduced them to the house. After all, Nigel was at the house . . . It was a problem, calculated to bring annoyance into their lives. She could not bear to have a quarrel between the two men.

"If you go on to your friends," she inquired, "will there be young people there?"

Nigel laughed enjoyingly—a little frank laugh. His eyes contracted as if at a vision.

"Whole tribes!" he said. "It's a large family—boys and girls I've grown up with. About . . . seven of them. And their friends spotted all round them in the district."

Marian gave no heed to this speech. Only one word had caught her attention, and had deafened her to the rest. "Girls!" she thought. "Yes, of course." Her quick mind instantly began voyaging among hidden possibilities.

iii

They had finished tea, and were still sitting by the table, when an uncontrollable restlessness seized Marian. She felt that she could no longer remain still. A return of that new feeling of sterile life urged her to some action, however inexplicable. She suddenly rose.

"Let's go and look at the bees," she cried. "Howard, Mr. Sinclair has never seen a swarm; so I've begged him to come over when he feels that ours may be imminent."

She was glad that Nigel so quickly followed her, glad, too, that Howard remained in his chair. Howard's presence was a source of discomfort. She could deal with him alone—it was so easy; but she could not control his gruffness towards another, or in presence of another. When they were together she was perfectly mistress of his moods; but she knew how quickly he became a boor, and did himself injustice. She had so often seen him behave badly that it no longer surprised her into indignation. She merely felt shame. And to Marian at this moment it was essential that she should not lose her new friend, as she might do if he found his welcome chilled and spoiled by the chagrin of a suffering man.

Together, Marian and Nigel made their way from the lawn to the orchard. Here, upon its outer limits, were placed three or four square hives. A gentle humming was in the air, and above each of the hives drove a few wandering bees, hovering about their home, laden and absorbed. Below, in the low entrance to each hive, other bees, arriving from afar, swooped and crawled to the entrance and beyond sight. They were the symbol of busy life, all concerned only with the great affairs of the hive, blind to the presence of strangers.

"Inside," explained Marian, "are frames that are being filled with honey. I expect some of them are full;

but others are only half-full, and all the little cells are being steadily filled by the bees. I can't show you the insides of the hives now; but you shall see them another time. If you've never seen such things you'll be very interested. The honey we had for tea all comes from these hives. We're able to have honey all the year round. It's one of my hobbies."

"You look after them all yourself?" Nigel asked, wonderingly. "No wonder you're too busy to think of questions for me."

Marian shook her head, smiling. It was such a naïveté.

"I help," she said. "But I can't manage the swarming or the hiving. They need too much acrobatic skill. But the general bee-keeping is fascinating. You see, one has such a sense of incessant, engrossed work for the community."

"Common ownership," he interpreted.

"They certainly have solved that problem—as men haven't done yet. But they're all—the workers—women, which explains that." agreed Marian. "And there's an extraordinary sacrifice of life involved. There's a horrible sense of the individual's unimportance. I think I rebel against that. It's purely instinctive, of course, both the indifference and the rebellion."

"There's not much sense of the dignity of the individual in our own life," suggested Nigel. "There's a great deal of talk about it, of course. Stupid, complacent, self-righteous talk. The worker, and so on . . ."

Marian again shook her head. Her voice was subdued.

"I hope you're not really cynical," she said. "I shouldn't like you to be that. Where you have life on the grand scale—not the grand scale; . . . I don't quite know what I mean; but say, in bulk—you must surely have some suppression of the individual. I should have thought it always had been involved. It's the whole

natural order. All birds and beasts exist—or they seem to exist—only for the continuance of their kind. It seems inevitable. I sometimes think that we're more conscious of that nowadays—with human beings—simply because we're conscious of the number of people there are in the world. They're more vocal. They protest more against their subordination. Personally, I find the sense of millions of other people, working and striving, always for meals and clothing and warmth. . . . I find it altogether paralysing. I can't yoke it with my own life, and this quiet garden. It shouldn't be so."

"No. It shouldn't," agreed Nigel, warmly.

"One ought to feel part of the whole."

"Yes. I do. I feel bitterly resentful of the common injustice. Sometimes so resentful that I want to overrun the earth, so as to destroy the complacency of all the mediocrities who keep injustice all-powerful by the sheer weight of their numbers and wealth."

Marian considered for a moment. His voice, although quiet, had betrayed emotion deeply felt. She thought: He's an idealist, and a sensitive; but his idealism is the sensitiveness of a young man. He's a rebel against order by instinct. He doesn't really grasp the universe, as he thinks he does.

"I'm interested to hear you say that," she said; "because it tells me something about yourself. But I don't think I'm interested in it as a view of life, because it seems to me to be a mixture of socialism and aristocratic sentiment. And they seem to me to be incompatible."

"That's just what it is—a mixture of socialism and aristocracy. That's the social religion of the future," cried Nigel. "Common ownership, and government by the wise men of the earth. Laws conceived by the wise men, and gladly accepted by the whole community. Not this present grasping, careerist charlatanry. . . . Oh,

I could be very expansive—very eloquent about this. I feel it so deeply."

"I'm sure you do," Marian murmured. But she was thinking all the time of Nigel, of his character as it was revealed in his speech, of his future, of the people he must know. Somehow it had never occurred to her until now to think of his acquaintance with others. Yet she could know nothing of his life. It was something entirely outside herself. It must have ramifications unsuspected. How little she knew of him! How much she wished to know! He had spoken of "boys and girls"—yes, but how great were the temptations of youth: how great a world opened to him! Boys-and girls—he would one day marry. . . . Instinctively she again looked at his face, speculating. She hoped his wife would be a girl wise and true and tender. Wise to help him, true to him in health, and tender in conservation of his ardent spirit. It would be a great opportunity, an enviable opportunity. . . . As she thought that, Marian sighed sharply. It appeared to her that she was surprisingly tired; and her eyes smarted a little, as if she had been straining them, or as if they had been full of tears.

iv

All this time Nigel, unconscious of her thoughts, was eagerly concerned with his passionate feeling for human justice and the improvement of the world. Marian heard him say the names of Solon and Lycurgus; she heard him speak of Marx and Nietzsche and Godwin and Shelley. His enthusiasm would have been infectious if she had not been watching him with the pride of a woman. He was at this instant the embodiment of all that was strangely and poignantly pathetic in ardent human endeavour. Too conservative in temperament to image a world of gods, too experienced in human nature

to believe that Nigel could endure a perfect world, she listened only to his voice, and saw only his fine careless enthusiasm. He was carried to a pitch of eloquence for which she could have no possible use, so quiet and delicate was her absorption in the analysis of common things. And yet all the time—and Marian sub-consciously knew it—Nigel was pouring out his heart in the confident belief that she was with him, as ardent as himself, understanding more than he could express, responding with her sympathy to every discovery that he made as he talked. It was an amusing game of cross-interests—Nigel, the young man, interested in ideas; Marian, the mature woman, interested only in people. A providence, overlooking the two, would have smiled ironically and perhaps would have sighed.

v

It was long before they returned to the house; and Nigel immediately started the engine of his car. Again Marian stood at the door, watching a departure. Ruefully, she noted this, and thought that perhaps it was one of her inevitable duties. But she laughed a little also, for her heart was light and her spirits high. She went with the quick step of elation back into the drawing-room, and then, moved by a whim, she sat down at the piano and began the Chopin Ballade which Nigel had played upon his first visit. She played with sensitiveness, but she had not the executive skill for such music; and she gradually knew that the mood she had sought to deepen was going away from her.

The piano closed, Marian stood long in thought before the empty fireplace. She went back in her mind through the whole afternoon. Her smile was inscrutable. Words and words and words made a background to her memory; but her intuitions were deeper than words, for she was

occupied in imagining a character. Quickly, as an artist works, she was giving form and originality to the new knowledges, and adding others that she drew from within herself far down in her secret heart where all understanding lay hidden from prying eyes. She felt God-like with wisdom. She bestrode the world and the human species. Magnificently she had created an image of a young man —not to worship but to comprehend.

Still elated she gave a low laugh.

"He's such a boy . . .!" she murmured. Then her face became perfectly grave, beautiful in its serenity. A last shaft of the setting sun put rich gold in her hair, and made her eyes bright and shining. She stood erect, tall and young and bewildering in her power to charm. It was at this moment that Howard came into the room by the door immediately to her left; and when, her expression unchanged, she turned towards the door, it was to see it closing as Howard withdrew.

CHAPTER IV: THE SWARM

i

THE next three days were remarkably quiet. Howard appeared regularly at meals, but did not stay longer in Marian's company. He was considerate and agreeable in behaviour, but his attention was uncertain. A settled melancholy was to be seen in his bearing —sometimes a melancholy that was comically exaggerated, nearly always a wondering stupid sadness that made him easily handled, as cattle are easily handled. He was quiet and pacific. And yet Marian was sometimes conscious that he was staring at her, trying in vain to discover something that she hid under her own quietness. She could not help seeking by reflection to learn what it was that so intrigued Howard. Was it something to do with Cherry? She could not tell.

Cherry had written upon arrival in London—a charming little scribble of thanks, hastily written, warm only if in reading the letter one imagined her prettiness; and then Marian heard nothing further. She still did not understand Cherry's state of mind towards Howard. She merely hoped for the best. Already the acute memory of the scene in the wood was fading. It was taking its place among many other recollections, to be summoned at will, but not to be dwelt upon in current thought. Marian believed the episode to be finished. Her imagining of Cherry was again almost wholly pleasant. From Robert she did not hear. She would do so presently, when he found time to perform a tiresome duty.

So the days went on, and she worked as usual at her

ordinary tasks, and each morning and afternoon more than once visited the beehives. Occasionally the sections were lifted out for her examination, and she gloated becomingly over the honey that the bees were so busily storing. Her interest in the bees was unfailing. She found their life and their energy altogether the most absorbing thing among all the common details of her existence. Far beyond housekeeping or gardening, because the bees had something of human interest for Marian, as they have for all who care to study them. She longed for the swarm. Everything was ready for it.

ii

And upon the third day after Nigel's visit he came again, about the same time in the forenoon. He had motored over, charged with messages and invitations from his aunt; and it was understood that on the Thursday, two days later, he should come in the afternoon to take Marian back to tea and dinner. The invitation had embraced Howard; but Howard was going up to London on Thursday morning, to return on Friday night. Accordingly it was modified, so as to apply to Marian alone. She was surprised and delighted at the elation that softened her heart.

They were at first in the house; but although the house was cool the garden, in this miraculously-continued fine weather, was too enticing to be neglected. It was still too early for the lack of rain to be seriously felt, and while the green was everywhere showing signs of dryness the brilliance of the flowers, forced, as it were, by the sun's persistence, made the garden vehement with colour.

"We've got nothing like this, you know!" exclaimed Nigel, standing bareheaded in the sun, and making an easy gesture with his hand. "Nothing. Your gardener must be a genius."

"Although you wouldn't perhaps think it, my husband often does a great deal in the garden. He's got a sense of management . . ." Marian was glad to praise Howard.

"How strange!" said Nigel, unaware of his grudging tone. "One doesn't think of him . . ." He paused, looking a little uncomfortable. Marian caught the slightest shrug of his shoulders, as at something inexpressible. How queer it was that the men should both be so quick to feel hostility to one another. Women claimed intuitions as their own property, but surely men were as unreasoning in likes and dislikes! She could explain the annoyance of each with the other; but not this finality of judgment. Faintly, she shook her head at the problem.

"It's difficult to realise what other people can do. We're so dependent on what we see them do. I've often known people for years—and then heard them sing, or seen something they've made with wood or thread, or a pair of pincers; and so learned that I had never known them properly at all. You know, people are awfully surprising, if you make up your mind about them."

"Quite," agreed Nigel. "I see what you mean. Of course, one overrates the possibilities of a few. I mean, one thinks they could do *anything*. Often enough they don't."

"I expect they do other things," suggested Marian.

"How magnanimous you are!" he cried, admiringly.

"Am I?" She was not displeased at his blurted enthusiasm; but she was assuredly unprepared for it. "I think I'm very ignorant. Do you realise that I don't know anything at all about the way you live, and the people you know, and where you've been, and *what* you know?"

Nigel turned to her in quick delight.

"Then there *are* things you want to ask me!" he exclaimed, with exultation.

Marian turned to him, smiling gravely. Nigel coloured to his forehead, a hot vivid flush that rose like flame through his tan.

iii

It was just then that the faintest sound was heard above all the sounds of the garden. It resembled the singing of a kettle, the peculiar noise that rises when first the water determines upon boiling. For some instants, perhaps, it had been imperceptible. Then it floated above the garden, a soft humming. Marian started.

"Hark!" she cried. "What's that?"

"An aeroplane far away . . ."

"No, no. It's the swarm. Hurry!" She ran, and Nigel followed. They quickly reached the orchard; but before they did so they could see the bees climbing and inextricably mingling in the air, like motes stung to sudden fury. Passing and repassing, climbing ever higher, augmented each instant in numbers, the bees filled all the air with their drone. Marian gave a quick gesture. "Stay here and watch where they go!" she commanded. "I must find Ledyer and bring him!" She ran again, leaving Nigel with his head in the air and his eyes intent. She hurried first to Ledyer—who was bee-keeper as well as chief gardener—and he ran to the orchard with a great can of water. Then Marian, following, carried a syringe. The other impedimenta of bee-keeping were in a small shed near the hives, and thither Ledyer had preceded her. Standing away, Marian tried by means of the syringe to keep the bees low. They clouded the air, incredibly numerous. There were perhaps thirty thousand of them, a perfect storm of bees.

"The queen has left the hive," she hurriedly explained

to Nigel. "She goes on laying eggs until there is no room for any more. Then she goes, and lots of the others follow. She goes to make a new community, d'you see. She's done all her work in the old one. So she leaves it. We want to keep the bees low, because otherwise we may lose them. Sometimes they go for miles. Oh, isn't it exciting to see them and hear them like this!" Marian was transfigured. If she had been troubled at new aspects of Nigel, and of Cherry, she may have realised less acutely the variability of her own nature. She was like a child, and like a commander. She was a child in her interest, a commander in her resolve. She thought nothing at this moment of Nigel; but only, all-absorbedly, of the bees.

The humming increased. It was now the singing of a boiler, a large, swelling noise that dominated the air. The bees, still driving through and into and over their comrades, like dust in an eddying wind, were obviously heading away. Instead of being columnar in formation they spread out and indicated the direction of their flight.

"Follow! Follow quickly!" cried Marian.

They were off—sweeping and swirling in the air.

Ledyer, a brown man of forty, with eyes deep-set and patient, kept on saying, half to himself:

"That's a good swarm. That's a good swarm." Aloud, he added, "They're going towards the plum. . . . See, they're making for the old plum."

Many bees remained still near the hive; but, still in billowing flight, the main body had swept across the open space in the orchard, and as Ledyer had indicated were already settling high in an old plum tree. They still formed a cloud; but it was once again a concentrated cloud, mobile indeed, but revolving around a fixed point. The queen had settled upon the tree. In a few minutes

the place she had chosen, a cleft near the trunk, from which two large branches extended themselves, was brown and glistening with bees. They crowded together, on top of one another, a humming, moving cushion of buzzing creatures.

Marian turned, sighing with amused relief, to Nigel.

"It's a good place!" she explained. "Isn't it an extraordinary sight!"

"Yes. Wonderful. Wonderful! It's fascinating. What happens now?"

"We just wait, standing looking up at them. Then we put veils on and Ledyer gets a skep and puts it over them, or he brushes them into it; and then we leave them in the skep, and later in the day we hive them. Unless they swarm again. That sometimes happens."

"What does that mean?"

"For us it may mean the loss of the bees. I don't know why they should swarm again. Sometimes it's an oppressive day, and they're restless and won't stop in the first place."

"It's splendid!"

"I knew you'd like it." Marian was quite close to him as she spoke in this moved tone of intimate confidence. Their eyes met.

iv

She had known he would enjoy the experience of seeing the bees swarm, because she herself enjoyed it. Her delights were his delights, she thought. It seemed to her that she was all the time stumbling upon identities, upon parallels, in their natures and in the things they loved. She had not yet reached the point of synthesising these; but she had such confidence in him, and she was so eager to give him pleasure, that she could only think: "We like the same things. The same things move us and delight

us. How could he fail to understand what I understand? The world's before him!"

So when their glances met thus intimately Marian was warmly happy, caressing him with her eyes, as a mother caresses a child by her merest glance of affection. And Nigel's response was a wondering happiness as great in its way as her own. They were two children upon a summer day, happy in the hour and their own relation.

There was nothing to be done. They could only stand or sit watching the bees clustering upon the plum tree, a moving mass. So they stayed for many minutes, until most of the flying bees had been absorbed and a great tail of bee hung down from the tree-trunk.

"I think it's all right now," said Marian to Ledyer. "Have you got the skep?"

"Yes, ma'am. Here. I'll get the ladder."

"And the veils." Turning again to Nigel, Marian added. "You'd better have a veil."

"Can I help?"

"I think you'd better not. Two people are enough. A third might get stung. You'd better just watch from a little distance, and take care."

"Then I won't have a veil."

"Just as you like. They're stifling, of course; and if you stand away there isn't really much danger. If a bee comes towards you, step quickly into the shade."

Ledyer was back again. A straw skep lay upon the ground, and he carried veils which Marian and he assumed. Marian's had a small inset piece of black veiling before the eyes; but the rest was white, and fitted over a little black cap which she wore. Neither she nor Ledyer wore gloves. In a very business-like way they advanced to their work.

"Keep well back!" cried Marian. But Nigel was so fascinated that he followed more closely than she wished.

He was almost immediately behind her. "Don't take risks." He only smiled, and Marian, smiling in reply, looked at him from behind her protecting veil as she had never been able to do before.

But they were recalled to the bees; for Ledyer had mounted the ladder, and he had the skep handed to him. Standing upon a middle rung, he cautiously approached the skep to the bees, observing them with an experienced keenness. It seemed to Nigel that some of the bees began immediately to crawl into the skep, and he said so.

"They'll follow the queen. Where she goes they go."

"How human," said Nigel, impulsively. Marian shook her head.

"How universal," she corrected. And then laughed from sheer irresistible mischievousness. Nigel was abashed, at her laughter, and at the sense of his own sentimentality.

V

Ledyer steadied himself, holding the skep in his right hand, and the brush ready in his left. He was perfectly expert, and therefore slow and confident in every motion. It was plain that he had no fear of the bees, although he had been often stung and knew the degree of pain to which any false movement might lead.

Both Marian and Nigel moved forward.

"Keep back," she warned. It was interest, and not bravado, that prompted him to press forward. "There's real danger of a sting if you come so near." He did not seem to hear her. Ledyer used the brush, very tenderly, holding the skep all the while. A mass of bees was detached. Individuals rose and floated, humming hotly. He again used the brush. The bees, disturbed, darted in the air; but most of their number were in the skep, clustering to its sides, re-forming like a rugby pack in a

scrum. Only a few, dishevelled, roamed above the heads of the humans who molested them. On tiptoe, Marian watched breathlessly. Nigel was so close beside her that their arms touched.

"I think it's all right," Ledyer said, in a minute. He began to descend the ladder, and the skep was placed upon the cloth which had been laid for it. "They'll go in there." He stood perfectly still, while bees surrounded him, without threatening to attack. Both Ledyer and Marian were delighted. They were keenly watching the result of the operation. Only Nigel moved. There was a sudden hum. A bee which had been knocked down in the melée rose suddenly, rose higher, and buzzed in his ear. Nigel ran.

"Hey, hey!" he cried, laughing. Then his hand went quickly to his cheek. "I'm stung!" he exclaimed. "I'm stung! Golly, what a sting!"

vi

His face was for an instant drawn with pain, for the sting was in his cheek. Marian, full of self-reproach, left Ledyer, and moved quickly to him.

"Hurry to the house!" she urged, and began to run.

Together they reached the house. In two moments Marian was again by his side. The pungent smell of ammonia made them both cough. She applied the ammonia to his swelling cheek, heartsick at the pain she knew he must be feeling.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," she said.

"No, no. It's my own fault. It's the fortune of war!"

Nigel was sitting down. Her hands touched his cheek. His arm, as his hands rested upon his knees, was against her waist. She was conscious of everything, of his pain, his nearness, her own sudden palsied clumsiness, the de-

sire she had to press his head to her breast. It brought the blood warmly to her face to realise this instinct. She was in sudden discomfort. Her eyes were half-closed, so sweet was the emotion that made her heart beat and her breath come in small tremulous gusts. Quickly she devised a small wad, and a bandage; and then laughed as she fastened the array with a safety pin.

"There!" cried Marian. She stepped back to regard him, and did not know how fixed and painful and inscrutable her smile was. She only knew that her heart was throbbing in her throat. Nigel looked back at her, smiling also. She gently patted the bandage, removing a slight crease; and with a perfectly natural gesture he caught her hand and softly kissed it.

Marian's eyes were closed. She withdrew her hand, and moved slightly away from him.

CHAPTER V: THE VISIT

i

ON Thursday morning Howard left for London, as he had arranged to do. Last thing on Wednesday he had stopped in taking his candle, and had looked awkwardly at Marian.

"I shall be going up in the morning," he said.

"And back on Friday night?"

"Yes. You're going over . . . there?" He jerked his head.

"To the Sinclairs. Yes. To-morrow afternoon."

Howard had hesitated. Then he had handed her the candle, taken another for himself, and waited for Marian to precede him. The stairs had been passed before he spoke again.

"You're coming back at night," he said.

Marian was puzzled at his tone. Although gruff, it was almost humble. In the semi-darkness she raised her brows.

"Why, of course. It's all arranged. Mr. Sinclair is going to drive me home in his car. I shall be home by eleven."

"The young fellow? Take care of yourself. It'll be a dark night."

"There'll be a little moon, I think. But he's a careful driver . . ." Marian was bewildered. The ends of her sentences were all in a higher note than the beginnings, because she was at a loss to understand him.

"Good night," Howard said, abruptly.

When she reached her bedroom, Marian noticed that

the flame of her candle flickered. She looked from the flame to her hand.

"Why. I'm shivering," she thought. "How odd!"

ii

In the morning, after her lonely breakfast, she remembered suddenly that she was going to the Sinclairs' in the afternoon. There was present in her mind a barely perceptible repugnance to the idea. And yet, until then, she had been so eager to go. It was very strange. She didn't seem to want to do anything at all. A faint unhappiness clouded her spirit, so that she hardly recognised herself, usually so free from vacillation.

"How odd! How *odd!*" she repeated. "Why *shouldn't* I want to go? Oh, I expect it's because I don't want to discuss Cherry with Mrs. Sinclair . . . Silly of me! I wonder if it *is* that. I'm getting mawkish!" She was quite extraordinarily perturbed. The whole state of her mind was unusual, and inexplicable. Marian shrugged at such a problem. Then, suddenly, there tumbled plump out of her mind the very knowledge that some unknown part of her had been trying to conceal from herself: "I do wish I hadn't to go there. I wish Nigel were coming here. We could be so happy here, alone!"

Nigel! She had not realised that she thought of him as Nigel. "I wonder if his sting is better," she thought, playing with her own perceptions, trying to cajole them by the introduction of a false subject for their exercise. "Poor boy! But he's a nice boy . . ." Then, uncontrollably, thrusting aside her own artifice: "We could be so happy here, alone. Nigel and I, in the garden. He talking, I listening. I oracular, he deceived . . . I wish he were coming here. I don't feel I want to go to see the Sinclairs. Mrs. Sinclair's . . . I don't like

what she said about Cherry . . . I don't like . . . her sharp, dreadful eyes . . ."

iii

Later in the morning Marian's feeling completely changed. As the hours passed she began to feel expectant, full of happiness. She was entirely calm, entirely mistress of herself and of her thoughts. They were as much under control as were her tongue and her lips, as much as her body. She lunched at ease, and drank wine with the meal, so that she enjoyed it and increased her cheerfulness by means that were supremely natural. Only after lunch did she notice that there were threats that the weather might break. Clouds gathered in the hitherto placid sky, and foamed slowly across the blue, broken still by the sun, but remorsely encroaching. Her spirits fell sharply, so contrary was this change of aspect from her imaginings of what the day would be. It would not matter—Nigel would come for her, whatever the weather. But Marian was struck by a chill when she saw the clouds, and she found it hard to climb back into her ordinary acceptance of the barometer. This was for her no ordinary day. It was a day . . . She was childishly disappointed.

"How silly!" she murmured.

That mood also passed. She imagined the Sinclairs—Tom Sinclair with his sly, cheerful, moroseness; Mrs. Sinclair with her garrulity and her penetrating eye; Nigel, his face swollen, and his hair ruffled by contact with her sleeve . . . His eyes near her own, his lips upon her hand.

Blushing, Marian drew herself upright.

"What an idiot!" she thought. "Here, this won't do! What time is it?" She looked at her watch. She had half an hour, at least; and she was ready. The garden

would be too cool with all these clouds about, so she would stay in the drawing-room. She would play. No: if she played she would not hear the first sound of the car. She wanted to do that. The reason she wanted to do that was that in the interval before it arrived she had to slip up to her room for a thick overcoat and a small, close-fitting hat. That was the only reason. The only reason.

How happy she felt. Not only happy, but beautifully alive. Her brain was clear, and her mind seemed to move with exemplary freedom. She herself moved with a greater freedom than usual. She crossed the room, in thinking that, and stood looking out upon the lawn, where the great wagtails ran about, as usual, like pretty mice. A big patch of sunlight turned the lawn to a brilliant hue. Marian stood watching the birds, lost in a little dream of nothing. She was so tall and so slender that one would not have been able to perceive her age, but would have supposed her at the dawning of womanhood. Only the set of her lips showed her to be mature, and her grave eyes.

Hark! Marian quickly opened the french window, straining her ears to catch the expected sound. She stood, poised, for a moment, intently listening. Then she turned, and ran to her room, laughing; and seized the overcoat which had been laid out for her, and, with fingers that trembled, put on the little hat. The hat had a veil, which she would lower for the journey. Gloves . . . the collar of her coat; the great buttons . . .

"How excited I am!" Marian suddenly rebuked herself. "It's so stupid of me!" Some overriding sense of happiness checked the rebuke, and carried her, laughing breathlessly, down the stairs and again into the drawing-room.

"I hope nobody saw me!" she thought, demurely.

iv

Three minutes later, while she waited so expectantly, the car was drawn up at the front door. She stood there upon the step to greet Nigel, her first quick, motherly inquiry directed to his still slightly swollen cheek.

"You're ready! How splendid!" cried Nigel, and was beside her.

"Is your face better?" she asked him, as their hands met. He presented it for her inspection. Smiling in silence they joined in an agreeing nod. "It's much better. Is the pain gone?"

"Almost quite gone. Shall we start at once? I didn't stop the engine. It's fluttering like . . . like a heart."

"Horrible!" laughed Marian, her eyes averted. She pulled on her gloves. "It's not a bit like any heart I've ever come across."

Nigel laughed also, faintly chagrined at the failure of his attempted analogy.

"You read hearts," he objected. "You don't listen to them."

"Look at the poor thing . . . trembling with emotion!" teased Marian. "You don't want to rest?" He shook his head. "Then get in first."

She followed him. He pulled the rug across her knees, and she tucked it behind her. The whole car was shaking with the pulse of the restrained engine. It seemed to be convulsively shuddering. A moment later the trembling ceased. There was a grating sound, a tiny groan; and the car began to move. The leaves of the bushes became suddenly immense as they brushed the side of the car. Then the bushes were past, and the gateposts loomed up. The brown road showed—all its ruts accentuated in this new association. The engine began comfortably to hum. The road fled from beneath her

feet, from brown to grey. The hedges flew past. Trees rose up and towered perilously above them. Everything was in swift motion, speeding endlessly like a kinema film. Fields spread upon either hand. The road in front narrowed into a point towards which they rapidly moved. The little car sped out into the unknown grey and green, adventurous, full of marvel. Below her eyes the road was turned to impalpable movement, grey and soft, beautifully romantic and distant, but close against her vision, like water in swift current seen from an open boat. Marian glanced aside at Nigel, whose unstung cheek was next hers. She lowered her veil, inexpressibly happy. Everything was past—all her tremors and her difficult thoughts: she now thought only of the moment, like a young girl absorbed in the thrilling adventure of life. Her years were gone. Her heart was silent, and her glowing eyes hidden safe in mystery. Nigel had come; they were alone together; their journey was begun. She had never realised how much emotion could lie in a short journey which she had taken many times before, or in the mere act of speeding along roads with which for so many years she had been familiar.

"How lovely! How lovely!" Marian was thinking; and far down in her gentle heart she was conscious of unrestrained joy.

V

They had little speech on the way, for both were content. And each instant the home of the Sinclairs came nearer, and the ordeal of Mrs. Sinclair's scrutiny. Marian felt steeled against the world. She for this moment feared nothing.

And then they were there, and out of the car, and in the house. Mrs. Sinclair was as garrulous as ever, taking Marian to her room to remove her out-of-door clothes,

and talking as though her tongue could never be still. She was full of pleasant delight in this visit.

"I've been looking forward to it," she gossiped. "And so have the children. I mean, Tom and Nigel. They're perfect children, of course. My dear, men never grow up. That's a thing I've learnt. We pretend sometimes that *we* don't. It's a well-known fact that women enjoy things more than men—more simply. But when they're not outrageous animals, men are just like children, waiting with their great beaks open.

"Children?" interrupted Marian. "I thought that was baby robins!" She felt ridiculously light-witted. But Mrs. Sinclair was not to be caught by chaff.

"All the same," she maintained. "Baby robins and baby men. They've been behaving as if you'd never been here before in your life. You *have* been here, haven't you?"

"Some of me has," cryptically admitted Marian, patting her hair. "The me that lived last month. And of course other months. If we're as old as you say, we *must* change!"

"Oh, don't talk like that!" cried the bewildered Mrs. Sinclair. As if characters were underclothing! I can't stand all this modern quibbling. It's awful. One never knows where one is. People say they're so many people. When I was young they were content to be themselves. It's all nerves, you know. They're so easily bored with themselves that they cultivate the notion that they're chameleons. It makes them more interesting, they think. And it saves them from the sense of responsibility. Now Nigel . . ."

"Nigel!" Unconsciously Marian repeated the name.

"Nigel says, when I tell him he's inconsistent—Nigel says, 'Ah, but that was yesterday. I was different then.' It's absurd. You never know where you are. You have

to say: 'Who are you to-day?' It needs too much patience altogether. I like the good old plain consistent character . . . like my own. I should have said *you* were consistent . . . Not now—only until the other day. You've got a temper, you know."

"I know," ruefully admitted Marian.

"Oh, yes," emphasised her friend. "You can't bear contradiction. You think you know everything. You don't."

"I'm glad I don't!"

"You needn't be afraid. You never will know everything. That's left to people like me."

"Oh, not *that* everything!" cried Marian, with mischief.

"I don't know what you mean. I just know it. It's a gift."

"No, no. It's not a gift. It's a vanity. It's an unpardonable vanity. It's like claiming to be a sort of God."

"My dear, I'm a religious woman. I know what I know. I see what I see."

Marian did not allow her face wholly to be seen, lest seeing should breed knowledge in Mrs. Sinclair's superficially active mind. Instead, she laughed mockingly.

"I think we all live in a world of our own making," she ventured. "I'm sure you do that as much as anybody else. If it's a nice world, I don't see any harm in it."

Mrs. Sinclair gave a responsive and contemptuous grunt.

"The world's all right," she remarked. "It's the people in it. They're fools. Even Tom's a fool. As for Nigel . . . he's hopeless. And you're as bad. He sneaks out, and comes back with a face like a pumpkin—all because you let him poke his nose into a hornet's nest."

"No. A swarm of bees."

"The sting's the same. *You* ought to have known better than that."

"I offered him a veil. I begged him to stand at a distance. I really couldn't do more. I . . . I haven't any control over him."

"Hn!" grunted Mrs. Sinclair. "It's my belief that you can do anything you like with Nigel. You're a dangerous woman, Marian."

Marian faced her, uncontrollably laughing at such mock-jealousy. Mrs. Sinclair was too engrossed in her grievance to observe the fear that lay behind such merriment.

vi

They talked a little further before they went downstairs again. Mrs. Sinclair drew Marian's attention to a hideous new cushion which she had made, and had all the news of Howard's movements, and virtuously refrained from any comment upon Cherry. Marian was thankful for that. In her present mood she could not have borne to argue about her young friend. Her heart was too full. She needed all her self-control for present events. So they stayed for a little while, chatting amicably, and at last descended the stairs.

The Sinclairs' house was an old-fashioned, roomy mansion, far too large for Tom and his wife, shabby and distressing in many ways. The pictures were copies in heavy gilt frames, with a few dilapidated portraits and some popular Academy favourites jostling the rest in a tedious incongruity. The walls were all very dark, with old embossed papers from which faded gilt ornamentation stood out in relief. The house was all lighted by ordinary gas, and the chandeliers were ornate and revolting in their tastelessness. The mantelpieces were great marble erections, without beauty; the carpets were

in green and dun colour. It was what used to be called a "comfortable" house, just as its owners were what would be called "comfortable" people. Marian was as much out of place in it as Cherry would have been; for she was modern in most of her ways and most of her ideas. On the way down she turned and looked up at Mrs. Sinclair, who so strikingly embodied all the traits suitable to the mistress of such a house. And yet Mrs. Sinclair was a woman both good and wise, and it was difficult to know her without loving her.

"I'm glad to be here," Marian said, quickly.

"No gladder than we are to have you here," said Mrs. Sinclair, with equal quickness.

They halted in the large hall. From the drawing-room came a sound that sent a rapid quiver through Marian's body and made her lips tremble. Nigel was playing the Chopin Ballade which she loved so much. By instinct, she turned her face from Mrs. Sinclair, in case her slight confusion should be noticed. Then she went forward and entered the room, Mrs. Sinclair closely following.

CHAPTER VI: THE DRIVE HOME

i

THE afternoon and evening were for Marian full of curious heats and chills. She had never felt so strangely uncertain of herself, so false in her response to the feelings of those about her. Of the three Sinclairs the only one to whom she found it possible to talk sincerely was Tom. His invincible ignorance was a relief. Not his to question her moods: he rolled out his dry complaints of the world with a cheerful disregard of every other topic. His gardeners, the boys who cleaned the cars, the general imbecility of mankind—all came under the lash of his slow and destructive tongue, which was rarely silent except while he was masticating. Marian loved him. He was simplicity itself, the exemplification of all that was kindly stupid in man. Mrs. Sinclair she could not deal with at all. That lady might see everything; she might see more than there was to see; but infallibly she would see beyond any manœuvre. And Nigel was impossible. Constraint heightened her spirits at one moment, and made her startlingly gay; and at another it seemed to introduce whalebone into her bearing, so incurably that she knew herself to be both gauche and chilling. And in those painful periods Marian felt her blood cool with a sense of failure. She sought in vain for the arts of self-control which might deceive the world; and succeeded only in attaining the distresses of imperfect sympathy which puzzled the young man and diminished his essential self-confidence. If that had been all, the visit to the Sinclairs would have been

an absolute failure. Fortunately it was not all. Marian's spirits, sinking under their weight of secret comprehension, rose again like a lark by sheer reaction from misery. At such times she had such rapture that it made her heart ache. Her eyes were mysterious and haunted. She looked and smiled with a new and incomprehensible tenderness. The world was changed for her from a spectacle of being in travail to a garden of singing birds, lost in dreams; because her own nature was drowned in a bewildering dream.

There was talk, of course, in which she heard her voice, as the voices of the others, coming from strange distances and expressing strange thoughts. It had no identity with herself, but was a spurious broken echo of some unknown Marian, capable of living without vitality and without interest in real things. It was the voice of one in a dream, as she was; but it was her protection, for it saved her from conspicuous silence. If it was sometimes flat, and sometimes incongruously moved, it still saved her from their too-curious notice. When she listened to Nigel alone she was herself, waiting patiently for the words he used, but not for their meaning. His words had no meaning. They went on and on, the expression of character that lies behind words and conduct, the character which she was so engrossingly engaged in imagining. Into the reservoir of her heart the voice of Nigel poured its confession of his soul. Marian listened, all the time checking herself so that she for ever kept her place in the group, without betraying all the tumult which her self-control fought desperately to conceal. To them all, she remained the charming Marian Forster that they knew. Only to herself had she become an enigma.

ii

Even Marian became convinced of her success when Mrs. Sinclair, with the voice of perfect good-temper which accompanied her most penetrating judgments, announced:

"The trouble about you, Marian, is that you see good in everything. You're too sympathetic. You go on the motto—I know I can't pronounce it in French . . . that if you understand everything you pardon everything. Well, you pardon a great deal too much, if you'll excuse me for saying so."

"I wish I did," said Marian, shaking her head.

"People take advantage of you."

"No. I'm quite sure they don't." In this Marian was indomitably firm. Mrs. Sinclair was checked. Her own remark had been serious under raillery.

"You don't find they cheat you . . . disappoint you?"

"No. When they disappoint me it's because—it's not often—I've formed a wrong expectation. It's not a falseness of theirs. And as for cheating me—they'd be ashamed to cheat anybody who trusts them."

"Oh, my *dear!*"

Nigel had been listening with some impatience.

"My dear aunt!" he interposed. "You're wrong and Mrs. Forster is right. I'll explain." There were at this determination three quite friendly groans. Tom Sinclair fanned himself a little with his handkerchief. "It's no good your groaning," proceeded Nigel.

"We know that," said his aunt; while his uncle piously ejaculated "God forbid!"

"I'll explain. The power Mrs. Forster has is that people want to keep her liking and respect. They know that she doesn't give liking and respect for nothing. She doesn't give them easily. When one's got them . . ."

"Conceited jackanapes!" cried Mrs. Sinclair.

"One knows their value. Now I couldn't tell Mrs. Forster a lie."

"I hope you wouldn't tell anybody one!" said his aunt.

"What did your father pay your schooling for?" demanded his uncle.

Marian sat through all this, flushing and paling uncontrollably, and laughing a little. She made one entreating effort to check the scandal of public interpretation; but she was afraid to do more.

"Aunt Kathy. I might tell you a lie."

"Oh!" Mrs. Sinclair was scandalised.

"I might tell you a lie for your own good; or because I didn't want you to know a particular thing at a particular time. To Mrs. Forster I never could tell a lie. I should feel that she'd *know* it was a lie. And I couldn't risk the loss of her respect."

Marian, unobserved, shook her head. He didn't know what he was talking about, this ardent boy who believed in her insight and her honesty. Mrs. Sinclair's comment was a gruff one that sent the blood startlingly back to Marian's heart. It was like a thunderclap.

"Well that shows one good thing, Marian. It shows he'll never try to make love to you."

iii

If her pallor could have betrayed her, Marian's voice would have checked the betrayal. It was perfectly steady, perfectly controlled and clear.

"How admirable!" she said. "And how safe it makes me feel."

She did not look at Nigel, but, smilingly, at Mrs. Sinclair, who was just ordinarily triumphant at a *mot*, and who had intended no more than a piece of rough common

sense. Mrs. Sinclair, pleased with herself, pursued this theme for a moment.

"I suppose anybody in love is a liar," she said. "I know I was."

They all laughed at her, and laughed again when Tom Sinclair added:

"You were, my dear. You were."

"You see, everybody thought Tom and I were a pair. He thought so. And I couldn't bear his being so sure of it, and other people being so sure. So I refused him. I refused him seven times."

"Six, my dear . . ." There were calculations, as the result of which Mrs. Sinclair was upheld.

"That's a funny thing about girls," said Mrs. Sinclair. "Though we oughtn't to speak of it before Nigel. "Not all of them, but some, will say 'no' over and over again, until the last time. It's like a horse taking a ditch."

"Well, I must say a good rider and a good horse go over the first time off."

"Not if the horse is high-spirited, uncle. It's a test of the rider's will, then," Nigel put in, swiftly. His uncle nodded.

"Quite right, my boy."

"After all, why *should* a girl say 'yes'?" asked Marian. "It means so much to her whole life. I expect if she realised all it meant she'd say 'no' twenty times."

Tom Sinclair grumbled out a reply to this partisan inquiry.

"If the *men* knew, she'd never be asked at all. What then?"

"I don't know. For most people I suppose it's a hindrance to know too much. They cripple their natures. I'm quite sure that happens a great deal nowadays."

"It's not 'knowing' at all, perhaps," said Nigel; "but

just what you were saying the other day—*thinking* too much. I'm sure you're right, Mrs. Forster."

For the first time Marian turned directly towards him. It was the first time she had felt strong enough to do so. Their eyes met frankly. She suddenly felt very grave, as though his sincerity upon this point were unwelcome to her. Into Marian's ears came an echo of Mrs. Sinclair's speech. "It shows he'll never try to make love to you." Was that true? So Nigel was now a mystery to her, simply because of that one phrase.

iv

After dinner they were able to walk in the garden, the two women with wraps over their shoulders. The clouds were heavy in the sky; but there was no sign of immediate rain. Only in the trees might be heard sinister shudderings, calculated to warn the timid. Rushes of wind disturbed the leaves. There was a continuous rustle, like the sound of waves close at hand. The night promised to be tempestuous.

Nigel and Marian stepped beyond the others, and were lost to sight in the dusk. They strolled about the large over-grown garden (so different in its disorder from the trim array of the Forster's garden); and Marian's eyes were dewy with the emotion which she had been concealing all the evening. They talked little. There was so much that might have been said between them, and so little that was capable of being said. Everything was disjointed and trivial. All went on, Marian felt, in their hearts, in the moving tranquility of understanding that both enjoyed.

"Your bees," he said, at last. "They're all right? They didn't swarm again?"

"No. They're happily hived. Are you sure your sting is better?"

"Quite sure. You were so prompt."

"I was so sorry." She hoped Nigel would not notice her voice.

"But I was so proud of it. And so grateful for your care. You don't know what it meant to me. You couldn't know how much."

Was he, too, moved? Marian would have given everything to know. She had thought and felt so much herself that she no longer had the power to read his attitude. It might mean nothing at all. Nothing. And in that case . . . What was it she wanted? To what abyss were her thoughts so inevitably bringing her? Marian shut her mind to consequences. She was afraid of them. She, who so far-seeingly appreciated all the elements of the life around her, was so afraid to know herself that she deliberately ignored everything but the moment.

"I couldn't expect you to repeat the experiment. I expect bees from the other hives will presently be swarming. It's an extraordinary cycle—going on endlessly from week to week during this brilliant weather."

"How enthusiastic you are!" he exclaimed.

"Am I?" she said, almost humble in her pride at his admiration. "I'm not very enthusiastic by nature. I'm too old for enthusiasm."

"What nonsense!" protested Nigel. "It's so curious to hear you say that. When I feel you're so wonderful!"

"I wish I *were* wonderful. I feel! . . ." She was speaking with difficulty, driven to candour by some imperious need. "I feel so colourless, so horribly dissatisfied with myself and my way of living. Just lately I've felt so lazy, as though I needed to work more and make something altogether different of my day's work."

"Isn't that only a mood? A summer mood?"

"Is it? I wish it might be. A late summer mood . . ."

Wearily, her voice had sunk. She was not at peace, but was chilled with momentary depression. She saw herself as a woman enduring pain without end and without reward. It was not self-pity. It was a kind of hopelessness against which her pride steadfastly rebelled.

Nigel made no reply. He too was deep in thought.

V

At last the darkness had fallen, and a moisture from the clouds; but as yet no rain. The trees were still distraught, so that Marian shivered. They went back into the ugly house and sat dully in the drawing-room until it was time for Marian to go home. Then the Sinclairs grouped about the car, and Mrs. Sinclair tucked her in, and Tom Sinclair remembered anecdotes too rusty for perfect recollection; and Marian and Nigel were once again in motion, the headlights of the car lighting up the road with a deceptive brilliance.

Marian's head was bowed. Where a young girl would confidently have snuggled close to Nigel, secure in his protectiveness, she shrank with dread from the least contact with his arm. It was because she was too well aware of every implication. She would have given much to touch him, much to betray with abandon the wish she had for his arms, his lips. And she could do nothing. She was trammelled. She was trapped by her age and her temperament. And Nigel respected her too much. "It shows he'll never try to make love to you." Suffocatingly her heart rose at the memory. In the noise of the motor her sigh was unheard.

"How ridiculous I am!" she thought. "How ridiculous! How contemptible!"

While she was thinking that, Nigel turned suddenly to her.

"I say, Mrs. Forster," he said, in a thick, unfamiliar

voice. "I've been wanting . . . I wonder whether you'd very much mind calling me 'Nigel'? It always worries me when you say . . . anything else. Would you mind?"

"Of course not!" cried Marian, with supreme naturalness. "How silly of you, Nigel!"

"Really? How splendid!"

"And you'll call me Marian, obviously . . ."

She saw his left hand leave the steering wheel and grope back towards the rug. Her own hand flew out to meet it, and the two hands met in a quick grip. The car swerved.

"Damn this car!" Nigel muttered, and gave a short laugh in which embarrassment and annoyance were mingled. "It won't drive itself."

There seemed to be some amazing subtle understanding between them. If it was so, it was past in an instant.

"I don't know why it should be so difficult to ask a thing like that," Nigel went on. "I suppose it's the fear of being refused. I've wanted to call you Marian . . ."

"Was it as hard as that!" Marian said, her voice caressing. Her eyes were closed, her breath slow and painful, as at a disaster. Her heart was choking her.

Nigel gave a little low happy laugh.

"It's funny, isn't it! It seems so simple, now."

Marian could not answer. She could only have made a trite remark. Instead, she allowed her hand to remain outside the rug, and quietly within the crook of his arm. Two minutes later they were at home, and she stood in the garden while he turned the car. It was so dark that they could hardly see each other, and their hands knocked together to the sound of a small murmur of laughter. Even so, the hands did not clasp, but each held the other's

arm just above the wrist, in a contact that was warmer still.

"You'll come soon," Marian said, in a low tone.

"Very soon," he said.

"To-morrow?"

"May I?" There was delight in his voice. "I will. How nice of you to ask me, . . . Marian."

Their clasp relaxed. He raised his cap. She stood dumbly waiting. Then, abruptly, he said good night and was once again in his seat.

"Good night, Nigel!" she called. And to herself, "Good night, my dear; and God bless you and keep you safe."

Alone, Marian bit her lip. A chill was upon her heart —a leaden weight of bitter disappointment. Her head ached. Slowly she went indoors, and removed her hat, and aimlessly stood in the hall, listening through the open door to the car's distant humming.

CHAPTER VII: NERVES

i

IT was long before Marian slept. The day had been too exciting for her brain to forego its activity; and she lay restlessly far into the night. And in the morning, when she awoke, that chill weight was still upon her heart. At first she could not understand the dreadful melancholy which burdened her spirit. Then, as memory returned, and a sense of reality, she sat up in bed, staring wildly before her.

"How unhappy I am!" she thought. "And what have I been doing? Where am I allowing myself to be led? I'm horrible! I'm ashamed and lonely!"

She slipped down again into the bed, her eyes closed once more. Her mind was working freely. What had she said? What had she said to Nigel? What had he understood? Oh, she felt she couldn't face him! If she must do so, if he showed any comprehension of her dead mood, she must lie. Coldness was now her only resource; coldness and deliberate distance. How absurd to be in such a panic! As though Nigel could ever read her heart! It lay concealed for ever, hidden deep under her self-control. If he had misunderstood her, that was the ridiculous error of a mind too sanguine. After all, she was Marian Forster. Nothing happened to her that she did not wish. Being mistress of herself, she was mistress of every emergency. There was no question of that. If she could believe it!

Bitterly Marian laughed to herself. She looked over

to the window, and saw the grey morning, and heard the wind tearing among the thick leaves of all those high trees. The day was like her mood, grey and stormy. There would be rain, and then the storm would pass. It was always so. But with human beings the storms attacked the root and fibre of all emotion. If Nigel should remain bewildered at her change. If agony should show in him, where then would her strength be? Would it endure? If Marian had believed in an immediate God she would have prayed for courage and the power to endure. As it was, she had to rely solely upon herself. She did not cry, because she never cried: always the pain sank deeper and more piercing, like poison absorbed into the blood. She was entirely without hope. Her eyes were opened to the sense of consequences. She no longer dreamed. The time for dreaming was past.

ii

All the morning the sky remained overcast. Against the dark clouds the leaves of every tree became more brilliantly green; but the rest of the garden, as of the house, was subdued in obedience to the threatening weather. With a sober face Marian rearranged flowers, wrote letters, had consultations with cook and gardener—all the little trivial things of her morning's occupation. She was not thinking of what she did. It was done mechanically. Her thoughts were upon one subject only, and they were such as to engross all her attention.

In the afternoon Nigel came. It was remarkable that, her own mind having covered so much ground, Marian would hardly have been surprised if Nigel had stayed away. She would have understood, and perhaps might have forgiven, his abstention. She had reached the point of wishing not to see him. It would have been a relief to her if he had not come. But as no two beings have

ever yet succeeded in keeping any intimate relation stationary, so it was not to be expected that Nigel's thoughts —if he had had any analogous thoughts at all, which Marian could not guess—had kept pace with her own. She received him in the drawing-room, where he waited because she was busy at the moment of his arrival.

Nigel turned round as she closed the door, and took several steps towards her. His face was alight, and the clasp of his hand warm to her deliberate limpness.

"Hullo!" he said, cheerfully. "Here I am, you see. I hope I haven't interrupted you at some frightfully important work."

"No," Marian drily replied. "Nothing frightfully important. Besides, I knew you were coming."

"Yes," said Nigel, hesitating. He seemed taken aback. Then: "Yes. We arranged it, didn't we?"

Marian looked quickly at him. Her nerves took alarm. Was he already inclined to encroach? That would be intolerable. What did he mean? She was altogether unscrupulous in her readiness to disclaim an arrangement.

"I'm afraid it isn't a very nice day for motoring," she said. "It's oppressive. I thought you perhaps wouldn't come."

"You'd rather I hadn't come?" he asked, sharply.

"No, no. I'm very pleased to see you. Of course . . ."

Oh, Marian had the situation well in hand.

"You're not well," he urged. "The storm's tried you."

"A little," Marian agreed. "But I'm perfectly well. A few hours doesn't make much difference to me." She saw his eyebrows lift, and went on. "We'll have tea early, shall we? And then you must play something. But no Chopin this afternoon."

"All right. But why not? Mrs. Forster, you're sure you're not displeased with me?"

"Mrs. Forster?" she questioned, breathlessly. She could not command her heart.

"Marian."

"The weather's been playing tricks with you, Nigel. Come and sit down, and we'll talk about . . . about . . . "

"About what?"

"The weather," said Marian, demurely. "Isn't that indicated?"

iii

She could feel him watching her with intentness. She did not dare to look towards him. If she had been playing, what sport she might have had in such an evasion! But she was not playing. She was fighting defensively. She was assailed, not by any desire of his, but by his steady gaze and the searching mind that was at work behind it.

"The weather will go away," Marian went on. "I hope it will go away, at least; and the brightness will be all the nicer because of the clouds."

"*Will* it go away?" asked Nigel.

"It's a summer storm." Marian pretended not to notice the other question that lay in so simple an inquiry. "It's not autumnal."

"Autumn," said Nigel. He seemed to be completely at a loss.

"Don't look ahead. Though I'm looking forward to September, I must admit. Howard and I will go to town, and see all the plays, and visit all the people we know . . . We shall have a bright life for a few weeks. Then we shall come down here again—as usual—a little while before Christmas."

"Oh, yes," Nigel politely assented. "Do you and

your husband go about a great deal—together—when you're in town?"

"As a rule, yes," said Marian. It was not true; it was essential that he should believe it.

"But I shall see you then?"

She gave him a surprised glance.

"Of course. Isn't that *arranged?*" She saw him start at the repetition of that word. Start, and again subject her to an examination.

"I hoped so. Marian, I'm afraid you must think me stupid. I expect it *is* the weather. I don't feel I . . ." He checked himself. "My aunt sent you messages. I told her they weren't valid, as I could satisfy her about your safe arrival home. But she sent them. She says she's old fashioned enough to send messages and to expect replies."

"What were the messages?" asked Marian, alert under her nonchalance.

"She said, 'Give my love to Marian, and tell her I hope she arrived home safely. And tell her that she's too clever for me about the things we didn't discuss.' I think that was all."

Marian laughed, puzzled.

"What did she mean?" She was genuinely unable to understand so cryptic a message.

"I think she really hoped you'd read more into her message than was there," said Nigel, with a return of ease. "I don't think she meant anything at all."

Marian thought a moment. The principal topic left untouched was the topic of Cherry. Well, she was complimented; because she had determined to keep silent upon that matter. And the direct inquiry about the journey. Was it teasing?

"I think you're right," she at last replied. "I don't think she did." But she wondered. The messages

did not tend to increase her comfort in this conversation.

iv

They continued to sit in the drawing-room, talking as acquaintances in spite of Marian's effort to recover cordiality, until tea was brought in. It was welcomed by both. Nigel awoke from his thoughtfulness, as at a new beginning; while Marian was glad to have something to do which occupied her hands and her attention. Together they munched cakes and sipped their tea, and there was a return of the ghost of jollity.

"Although it's an insipid meal, tea *is* a meal," remarked Nigel. "It's real."

"I prefer it to any other meal in the day," said Marian, stoutly.

"It's a woman's meal," he declared. "It's not very masculine."

"What *is?*" she inquired. "We only think of masculine as meaning something crude and stupid, the instinct to go out and kill something, to drink too much, and so on. It's not really a vital distinction."

Nigel's brows went up in a smile of surprise.

"Is that true?" he asked. "I don't mean I'm disagreeing."

"Isn't it? Aren't there crude and stupid women? They're most of them that. Their instinct is just as much to kill. There's not much difference, it seems to me. Because a man is well-bred he isn't necessarily effeminate."

"One thinks . . . I suppose I'd been thinking of man as an out-door beast. I really can't put up a fight, Marian. I'd never thought about it. I think I like to make a mental distinction between the sexes. *That's* masculine, isn't it?"

"My dear! If you had heard ordinary women generalise about men!" cried Marian. She did not realise that she had said "my dear."

"You don't think there's a distinction?"

"I don't make it. Women are human beings."

"One's taught to think of them as more."

"Yes. And you end by thinking them less."

Nigel was quiet for a moment.

"I wonder," he said at last, thoughtfully. "I think of you as something very much more . . . I don't mean, inhuman. I mean finer, truer, more concerned with essential things."

She looked at him with eyes that were old and pained.

"That's a mistake that every young and chivalrous man makes," she said, in a low tone. "I wouldn't have it otherwise. But it isn't true. I . . . We are betrayed by what is false within."

"But *you,*" Nigel cried. "Marian: you see this is more than a casual impression. It's a conviction. I think of you as entirely candid and true. Forgive me. I know it's all awful—to talk like this; but I must say it."

Again Marian looked at him, stirred to pity.

"And don't you see that's what makes you so attractively naïve?" she cruelly said. "Don't you see that your youth believes in everything, and only your experience checks you from the folly of obeying every impulse?"

Nigel paled.

"You think of me as young?" he asked. "I mean, that's your first thought?"

"I think it is," Marian replied, committed by perverse instinct to this cruelty. She could not, however, leave it unmodified. She could not have borne to do so. "You mustn't suppose it's reproach, or a slight. It's a source of pleasure."

"Well," said Nigel, with some difficulty. "I think of you as young. But not naïve. I don't think I was that. I see I must be. Of course, it hurts me. I thought you felt . . . equal. I see you . . ."

"Nigel!"

"Oh, Marian, I must . . ." He started to his feet.

"You've finished tea?" Marian also rose.

Nigel was beside her, taller than she by so little that their eyes were almost level.

"Marian, I must touch you." His arm was around her—quite gently; not in embrace. She did not draw herself away. Her face was unreadable. Every least piece of art in her hurried to make it a mask, to make her voice cool, to make her body immutably her own.

"Well?" she said, very quietly. His arm dropped. He shook his head.

"It's no good," said Nigel. "I see what you say is true. I'm very naïve. Are you . . . are you so experienced?" It was his first bitterness, drawn from his deep perplexity about her.

Marian drew a quick breath.

"I've suffered more than you," she said, her eyes veiled from him. "I know more."

"I know it. I've always known it. But not that you despised me."

She was deeply shocked. Impulsively she caught his arm.

"I've never done that, Nigel."

"I wonder." He moved away, looking about the room in little jerks of thought. "It means so much to me to have your . . . your respect."

"You have it. I respect no one more."

"It's not . . . it's not only your respect I want," cried Nigel.

v

Marian's lips were twisted in a smile that must have seemed to him ironic. They faced each other, but not with any interchange of glance. She felt more tired than she could remember feeling since the days of Howard's first known unfaithfulness.

"I know," she said, wearily, pityingly. Nigel remained still for a moment. At last, in a tone of husky reproach, he spoke again.

"You're different, to-day, you know," he said.

"I'm different every day."

"So am I!" It was defiant, the voice of a young creature in pain. "I'm different. I can be as cruel as you."

"Yes, I'm very cruel," Marian said. "Very cold."

"And so warm and kind . . . " His loyalty came rushing back.

"Interested," she corrected.

Nigel crossed the intervening space, and looked at her with a gravity that equalled Marian's own.

"I think I know you," he said. "I know you better than that."

Marian did not flinch.

"It just occurs to me to wonder," she said, "why we're talking like this at all. It's rather unnecessarily intense, isn't it?" She spoke very quietly, and not at all lightly. Her tone took all the insincerity from her words. Nigel responded in a tone as serious.

"I suppose it is," he said. "I expect I've been making a fool of myself." As she did not attempt a response, he asked: "Have I?"

"No," answered Marian. "But I think I've been behaving abominably. We'll put it down to the weather, shall we?"

"I wish we could," Nigel told her. "It's more than that, though. If only I could understand! Marian, how is it two people *cannot* open their hearts to one another?"

Marian gave a quick smile.

"It's because they haven't got the keys to their own hearts," she replied. "And as for the other people . . ."

"Yes?" Because she had stopped, he urged her.

"They carry emergency keys, and they don't fit, I suppose. I'm proud of that fancy. I hadn't thought of it before."

"And you say I'm young!" cried Nigel, reproachfully.

"I couldn't tease you if you were old."

The danger, perhaps, was past. Marian felt no longer stilted. She no longer felt that she must stand perfectly still. Even as she had this instinct it faded; for she knew the atmosphere had changed.

"No, it's no good," Nigel said. "I can't joke. It hurts me when you tease me. I think I'll go now. Marian, are you being quite sincere with me?"

"Nigel, I'm trying to be sincere to myself."

"Not to me?"

"Only secondarily."

"I want you to be sincere to me. I'm sincere to you."

"I know you are. Nigel, my dear; d'you think I don't appreciate you?"

"Yes." It was a pained, unhappy admission.

"Do . . . *do* believe me. If I were to say how much . . ." She checked herself with great effort, "how much I believe in you, you'd be embarrassed."

"Try me," he urged, with a sharp laugh.

"Nigel!"

"I'm sorry. Good-bye, Marian. I've been a pig this afternoon. Forgive me. I . . .I won't come till I'm——"

"It's the weather, you know," she interposed.

"Yes, the weather," said Nigel. He had a very grave face as he drove off. Marian, returning to the house, found that her mouth was dry and her knees unsteady. She sat quietly down. She wished she could cry. It would have been a relief to cry. Now, all her tears seemed gathered about her heart. Poor heart, it was drowning.

CHAPTER VIII: HOWARD

i

THE interval between Nigel's going and the return of Howard was for Marian one long silent misery. She had in her nature no voluptuous satisfaction, such as many women possess, in the contemplation of her own pain. It was not that she sheathed herself against pain, or that she dreaded it; but simply that her mind was free from sentimentality. Having resources within herself she did not need the excitements of hysteria. The heart-ache from which she suffered was dual in its cause. Obeying instinct, she had inflicted pain, however transient; that which she herself endured she knew to go deep into her being.

As the time for Howard's arrival drew near she went upstairs to bathe her face and to change her dress. She was shocked at the greyness of her pallor. The face she saw in the mirror was haggard. Lines showed in the forehead and at the corners of her tightly closed lips. Thank God she had not to meet a woman! With Howard she could hope to deal: she had no fear of him. Women had looked into their own mirrors, and so were skilled in the reading of faces.

But after she had washed, Marian looked better. Her health was normally too good to permit of serious revelations, even after a night and day of distress. In her evening frock, with her hair done afresh, she regained some of the cool loveliness that was the heritage of her quiet life. Again she regarded herself.

"I'm better," she thought. "I feel better." Ex-

traordinarily rapid thoughts flew through her brain, too quickly to be transfixed. "I'm still pretty. Why don't I still satisfy Howard? Could I? Do I want him back as my lover? No: I could do it. I *think* I could do it; but I don't want to. I couldn't bear it. Besides, possession, to a man like Howard . . . Nigel. He's loyal. He's beautifully sincere. If there's anything it will pass. Can I bear that also? I can bear anything—anything. But he's so simple in heart. Is he? What do I know? What does anybody know? I don't know anything about myself. If I were really tempted . . . Why does one risk temptation at all? Is it cowardice, is it . . . What is it? Fear of consequences? Dread of the unknown? He'll tire. He doesn't think. . . . I've imagined all this. There's no crisis at all. There's nothing. There never *is* anything, except what one creates in one's mind. Is it just that I shackle myself? Or is self-control a virtue? What do I want? I don't know what I want. I don't think things out. I'm lymphatic, cold, hugging my own vanity. I want admiration; but not its sequels. Not the sacrifices that go with its gratification. I want to be always myself, always the thing I know as Marian. How strange it is! How callous I am *towards myself!* That's my inhumanity. It's not that I'm cruel to others. Only to myself, and incidentally to them. I'm hard—no, not hard. I hope I'm not hard, because I so hate hardness in other people. I'm too old. I'm so old and timid that I can't let myself go. I've been a coward to-day. Yesterday I was a coward, egged on by curiosity. Curiosity, the sense of danger . . . What a charm risk has! And then I withdrew, like a cat afraid to wet its paws. He'll think less of me. He's disappointed. He's found me out. He knows now that I'm as false as any other woman . . ."

That thought was too much for Marian. Aloud, look-

ing straight before her, she said in a little moved voice that she made no attempt to control:

"My dearest, I'm not false. I'm true. I'm true enough to sacrifice myself. You see how readily I sacrifice both of us." It was bitter irony that overtook her. "I wonder if you're as true. If you were . . ."

Her hands were pressed to her face, covering the treacherous lips. Very gravely she turned, and crossed the room to the door. Marian was in deep thought.

ii

Howard came. He was unchanged. Still his face was drawn, and his manner unusually gentle. They seemed happier together than they had been for years. He had been working, and he was tired. But he was not at all irritable. Marian thought:

"A man of Howard's age can love a young girl. It's so simple. He can flatter her vanity. He can attract her. The converse is untrue. A woman always carries the sense of her age. It's because she is mature early. Men are never mature. They're always children. How untrue that is! They like to think of us as mature. And we respond. Always we respond. What a puzzle it is! As though I knew any more, or any less, than he. As though I understood any more than Nigel!"

She was at the time sitting opposite to Howard. In his silence she found forgetfulness of her own thoughts, which went on beneath her attention, like the undersong of a summer afternoon in the country. Nobody, least of all Howard, would have guessed her unhappiness. It was hidden away, already a memory.

iii

"Nigel Sinclair called this afternoon," Marian said. "He just came over to tea." Howard listlessly nodded.

"The Sinclairs seemed just the same as ever. I don't think they'll ever change."

"No. They don't live. They stagnate."

"They seem to get a lot of pleasure out of their existence. Perhaps we shall be like that in a few years, Howard."

"God forbid!" he ejaculated. That started Marian upon a fresh track.

"You'd rather be . . . worried?"

He brushed his napkin across his lips.

"So would you," he remarked, abruptly. It surprised her.

"I thought you thought me very placid," she ventured. "Don't you?"

"Anybody would think we hadn't been married for fifteen years. D'you think I'm an owl? I know you're alive."

Marian laughed, not very heartily, but with a note of uncertainty.

"You're not generally so . . . lavish . . ." she said.

"You've always underrated my intelligence," was Howard's retort. "At least, as long as I can remember."

Had she done that? Marian pondered. She didn't think it true.

"No," she claimed. "I think we could still quarrel. Only we don't."

"Not openly," said Howard, with a grim smile. "You're too clever for me."

iv

Marian thought: It seems that you can still surprise me, for all my cleverness!

"I don't think I underrate you," she said, in a moment. "How do I seem to do it?"

Howard's silence was as full as her own had been.

"Well, you don't say much to me," he explained.

"That's because I said it all years ago," suggested Marian. "Nothing's left."

"No," he surprisingly asserted. "You gave me up."

"I didn't think I'd been so stupid. You've never given me up. Perhaps I'm defending myself."

"It's not that. You don't defend yourself. That's one reason why I feel you're so damned superior to me."

"Well, Howard, you don't really feel that," she objected, frankly. It was too absurd.

He reflected, still without irritation. His red face grew a little redder.

"No, I don't," he admitted. "Sometimes I wish I did. Then I could blame you. D'you never realise how annoying it is to be married to a woman who understands you too well? I never get a chance to feel superior to you. I never feel you're a prig, or an old maid; but I do feel there's a sort of god-like calm about you. It's damned annoying."

His speech—rather a long one for Howard—had been so candid that Marian weighed it before answering.

"You needn't envy my god-like calm," she said, rather pleadingly. "It isn't real."

"I never know you. I know you know me pretty well all through." He paused, thinking. At last, he went on, harshly, "How did you find out about . . . this?"

"About what?" Against her will she was inexorable.

"You knew I was miserable. I'm in hell."

"You're not exactly an enigma," said Marian, cautiously. Howard gave a rough laugh.

"You see what I mean," he cried. "You *are!* That's what I complain of. Sometimes I feel you know everything. You don't, of course."

"I'm quite sure I don't," said Marian, with a pale smile.

V

Later in the evening Howard resumed his strange topic.

"D'you know you're the only friend I've got?" he asked, abruptly. Marian did not answer. "I've got no friends. You make friends."

"Never," she said.

"Easily. Look at this young chap—Sinclair. Anybody can see that you can do anything you like with him. You don't even flirt with him. You're like—not ice, but steel. You know, Marian, you're a beautiful woman. Beautiful. I'm proud of you. And what am I?"

"Well, I can tell you that," admitted Marian.

"I know. You'll say I'm a sentimentalist. Damn your brains. They're a rotten thing for a woman to have. Are you happy?"

"On the whole, yes."

"You look a bit blue now."

"It's the weather. The whole day's been trying."

"Yes. Is young Sinclair in love with you?"

It was so unexpected that Marian jumped. The shock was immediately past; but it had been severe.

"Not at all," she said, composedly. She dreaded a supplementary question. It did not come. Instead, Howard went on, quite believingly:

"You're a marvelous woman. You can deal with anything. D'you know that you made me feel the complete cad about . . . about that kid?"

"No."

"You did. Without a word. It's extraordinary what a power you have over me. I suppose it's personality—

moral power. And I go wambling on, boring you; and you don't shut me up."

Marian rose. It was ten o'clock.

"I shall now," she said. "I'm positively too tired to stay up any longer."

Howard came nearer, and put his arms round her. For an instant she submitted without constraint to his embrace. He kissed her lips. That showed how dead her love for him was. She was entirely unresponsive. Howard's cheeks might have been the back of her own hand for all contact with it meant to her. She was glad when he let her go again.

CHAPTER IX: SUMMONS

i

FOR a week Marian neither saw nor heard from Nigel. Sometimes she was thankful; sometimes she was so sick with longing for his presence that she was tempted strongly to send a message to the Sinclairs. Pride forbade that—and perhaps caution. She did not write. When Howard again went to London in the middle of the week she was many times torn with vehemently conflicting impulses. They came in waves, at first overwhelming her, and then gradually, as Marian's will asserted its power, dying once again into nothing. The temptation was always the same; her defences were always different. They were lonely days, in which she spent much time in such heightened scrutiny of Howard, and Nigel, and herself that extraordinary new insights came to her about all three. Although tormented and unhappy, she was never hysterical, because she was dealing with a matter principally affecting herself, and she had herself in control. Nigel away, her self-distrust was quiescent.

Each day Marian's mood changed. The summer was at its height; the middle days of July were making the garden radiant. Everywhere, in garden and house, there was work that claimed her attention; and when she was working she forgot every doubt and found relief. Books were less successful; a book will always give way to a train of thought. Only active occupation can really distract the unhappy mind. But the garden always pleased

her, and she thought: "If Nigel were here, how content I should be."

Nigel—Nigel—Nigel. That was her obsession. Tones and words and emotions throbbed in her memory. Marian could see him as he had been at each of their meetings, and as if he were still speaking she could continuously hear his declared opinions—expressed in that ardent voice that so moved her. Always her vision of him was a happy one. She found herself smiling. Never did there come the quick painful rushing of a glimpsed antagonism. All was happy and charming. Until their last encounter, when there was still no jarring note in her memory, but only a kind of remorse and a defensive bewilderment.

She longed for their meeting. That he would come again Marian did not question. Although she might nervously dread such a meeting her heart both demanded and expected it. There was never in her mind the sense that Nigel had gone forever. If there had been that, her pain would have been almost unbearable. She continued to look with confidence to their restored intimacy.

ii

At last it was Thursday, and she had a long day in the July sunshine. The garden had never been more lovely, and she was out-of-doors during the whole of the morning. In vain did she strain longing ears to catch the most distant hum of Nigel's car. A bumble-bee blundering about neighbouring flowers made her start. Other sounds, the far-distant lowing of a cow, the happy twittering of the birds, made the countryside appear full of inexhaustible energy. Everything in the garden was still, but a breeze moved the leaves upon upper branches of the tall poplars. Butterflies flickered about the lawn; a dragonfly whipped brilliantly before her eyes. List-

lessly, Marian heard and saw it all—the endless current of the July day. It would go on if she were not there. Her presence was only a part of the whole scene, an insignificant part to everything except herself. She felt remote from the world, lost in one of its backwaters. Bitterly she was assailed by that sense of uselessness to which her attention had first been drawn in Cherry's energetic company.

With a quick sting of jealousy, Marian realised that Cherry's energy was no more fruitful than her own calm. Cherry wasted her physical energy at the bidding of her restless nerves. She was like every other young animal, exulting in her youth and wantonly scattering its marvels because they seemed as plenteous and recurrent as the golden hours. Was she so to be envied? Marian thought not. If it had not been for her present *malaise* she would have continued to pity Cherry. It was a sign of weakness that Marian's pity had for a moment given way before her longing for the lost power to be imprudent. Prudence, caution—those September qualities as extolled by all mediocre philosophers—were without savour. Having them, Marian rebelled against her possessions, because they had so long ago mastered her impulses. The victory was always to youth. Alas!

The morning was gone. Strange that she should so have counted upon his coming! Was it her need alone that had provoked such an intuitive certainty? How could Marian tell? Upon awaking, she had thought to explain a new sense of happiness by this expectation. If he did not come, what was she to do? Another week, he would be gone; and then they could not meet again until September. A chill stole upon her. Of course he must come—if it were only to say good-bye. But why had he not come before? Was this a cruelty, or a feeling of humiliation? She was racked by fresh doubts, miserably

affected by all the thoughts which her quick brain so mischievously obtruded upon her attention. The afternoon drew slowly to its end. She waited. In vain. When the hour came for her evening meal she had entirely lost heart. It was too late. He would not come now. Sober and chagrined, Marian sat alone, stupid with disappointment.

iii

The evening was beautifully warm and fragrant. Drawn by its loveliness, Marian pulled back the curtain that had hung across the open french windows, and stood looking out into the twilight. The sky was almost mauve, and faint stars glistened. The trees looked very dark, because they were so dense and because they stood out against the pale sky. There was no noise. Tempted farther by the quietness, Marian went into the garden, walking slowly, as if she were dreaming. In her light dress she looked almost spectral in that dimness.

It was nearly ten o'clock. The servants had all gone to bed. She was alone. She stood looking hither and thither, at the flowers and into the distance, so gently curtained by the falling night. For a time she had no thought of her loneliness; and then a small timidity, due, perhaps, to no more than a flutter of air upon her cheek, caused Marian to resolve that she would stay no longer. She turned accordingly towards the house, walking with her head bent, seeing the grass mysterious before her, very soft and colourless in the general grey.

She had taken only a few steps when the tiniest sound caught her ear. She stood quite still, listening. It had been the click of a latch, carried on the stillness, but unmistakable. She thought it must be the latch of the gate leading from the road to the house, and moved to a point from which she could command the gravel drive. With

a tremor she discovered that her guess had been correct. There was a figure within the gate. Excited, and a little frightened, Marian went forward. The figure was that of a man. He appeared to be leaning a bicycle against a tree. As she watched him, the man stood upright, and came quietly towards her. Marian did not stop, but went on, her nerves quivering, but her courage now high. The man suddenly raised his hand. He took his cap off, and carried it as though to attract her attention. Then only did instinct tell her that this was Nigel.

iv

"Don't be frightened, Marian," he called softly.

"Nigel!" Her cry was choking. They were immediately afterwards together.

"It's a terrible hour to come. I have to go away very early in the morning. I only knew just after dinner, and I cycled over. Is your husband here?"

"No. In town. What is it?"

"Can we walk in the garden?" They turned again, surrounded by the mysterious gloom. "Look here, Marian. This is just between us, you understand . . ."

"Yes, yes."

"My father wrote to me yesterday—a long letter—saying that he thought I'd better go back to town at once. He promised to telegraph if it was necessary; and he's done so. I can't go to-night. It's too late. But I must be at the office in the morning. Marian, you know that a man like my father has all sorts of ways of hearing things that we don't hear. He's . . . well, you must let me say that, and take it for granted, because I know it is so . . . He's somehow got the idea—I don't know how—that there is danger of a war, a big war."

"A *what!*" Marian was aghast. "But why?"

"I don't know. You see, I've been down here. I've

been seeing no papers at all. And no people, either. He may have heard it at his club. There's always club-chatter. Or privately. In all sorts of ways. I know nothing. But he's not an alarmist. If he says there's a danger, it's likely. So he wants me back at once, because we've got commitments all over the world . . . "

"But Nigel! Not a war that . . . England . . ."

"I don't know. It seems impossible. If there's anything, you'll hear of it. If it's nothing, then my going won't mean anything. You mustn't feel troubled at all about it. I tell you so as to explain why I'm going. I've only told uncle and aunt—and now you. I couldn't bear to go without seeing you. I had to come. Not to worry you with fears, or about myself . . . "

"Nigel!" Marian put her hand quickly to his arm. All her fears for him were alert.

"Just to say good-bye . . . until September."

"No more?" She was breathless.

"No. Until September. I couldn't bear to go without seeing you . . . "

"Of course not." Although her voice was unsteady, Marian was urgent. "Why haven't you been before?"

Nigel did not speak at once. She heard his breath drawn deep.

"Would you have cared for me to come?" he asked. "I thought you were tired of me."

They were standing very close together now, their arms and shoulders touching.

"Why should you think that?" asked Marian, in a strange, heavy voice. She could hardly see his face. He seemed in this light so impassive; and his whole manner was so changed that he was a different man from the Nigel she had understood a week ago. He was older; not sanguine now, but in the grip of some emotion more

resolute than his old eagerness. His voice chilled her with foreboding.

"I don't know," said Nigel, slowly. "I wish I did know."

"It's not true," Marian told him. "I'm anxious about you now."

Impulsively she moved away from him, and they continued to walk together in silence. Now they were in the shadow. Marian could not think of anything that she could say which would not precipitate some event which she dreaded.

"I can't realise the possibility you speak of," she cried. "A war seems such an out-of-date thing. Isn't it possible that when you get to London you may find it's all nothing? And in that case won't you be able to come back here? It seems such a shame to break your rest."

"I don't know. Marian, to anybody but you I'd pretend. I'd pooh-pooh the whole thing. I'd promise to come back in a couple of days. To you I can't. I don't think I could ever pretend to you. So I want you to know that my father's not a chap to take an alarm without reason. D'you see? I can only tell you what he's said to me. And that's very little."

"I see, of course. It's only that I can't grasp it. That I'm so sorry you're going."

"You *are* sorry?" he questioned, with a little break in his voice. "Marian, I've been thinking you might be . . . well, mildly glad for me to go."

"Why?" Marian did not recognise that hard voice of hers.

Nigel suddenly put his arms round her. They stood in the shadow, their hearts beating very fast, breast to breast, excited and in discomfort. Then Marian's hands gently pressed him away. Nigel's arms slackened; but they did not cease to embrace her.

"No," whispered Marian. "No, Nigel. I'm so sorry, my dear."

They stood apart, not looking at each other. When Nigel spoke his voice was quite low and dry.

"You see," he said huskily. "After all, it's better that I should go."

Marian could not answer him. She was stifling, her breast rising with the sadness and agitation of her heart. She could not tell how great his unhappiness might be: hers was overwhelming.

"Yes," she went on, trying to be wise, trying to be composed, and her voice painfully thin and unsteady. "It's really best that you should go. Much the best. There may be no need for you to go . . . Your father may be wrong. I hope—oh, I hope he is. But if you stayed, if you came back . . ." She could bear no more. "I'm glad you came. It's a relief to me. There needn't ever be a misunderstanding between us. But you must go now. I don't think I can . . ."

Uncontrollably she raised her arms, and was close against him once more, her eyes closed and her lips offered for his kiss. It was their parting; and the kiss was long. Nigel kissed her cheek and her breast. Neither spoke. Perhaps their hearts were too full. Perhaps Nigel was puzzled, perhaps entirely convinced by her assumption that they could never be lovers. Who could tell? Not Marian. Again they kissed, silent and passionate. Then once more they separated, and went back towards the house. Within a few minutes Nigel was gone. The night was silent again, and Marian was alone.

V

Only later, when she was in her bedroom, did Marian awake from her dream. She shuddered deeply: and stood with a feeling of exhaustion overpowering her.

She was utterly weary. Her mind was lethargic, as though she had been drugged. She could see nothing, had no thought of going to bed or of undressing, but stood there trembling, her lips very dry, hands tightly clasped. Nigel was gone. She had sent him away uncertain still of her love. And all because her love was so great. It was not cowardice that had made Marian deny herself; nor any sense of moral duty to Howard. She had not thought of Howard. That would come on the morrow. Only some instinct had made her see the impossibility of continued love between herself and Nigel. She had followed her instinct. And this was the result.

At last terrible physical anguish seized Marian. She knelt beside her bed, her arms stretched helplessly across the counterpane. She could endure no more. The pride which had supported her hitherto, when alone and with Nigel, was no longer operative. Passionately moved, she was abject before the agony of her parting with the one man who could give her happiness. Long dry sobs shook her body. She was without hope.

BOOK THREE: MARIAN

CHAPTER I: SLOANE STREET

i

THE Forsters' flat was in Sloane Street, and in September it was to this flat that they migrated. The first shock of the oncoming of war had passed. The first dark days of fear and improvisation were over, and had been succeeded by still darker days of reality. Past was that first thrilling Sunday, when hoarse-voiced men stirred every home with their shouts of "British Cavalry in Action." Not yet had the scourge of intoxicated gaiety fallen upon the land, when every night was an orgy, justified by the sense that time for living was short and the temptations of the moment irresistible. There were still large bodies of apathetic people, wondering what the war was about, angrily debating the freedom of Belgium, the doctrine of deliberate preparedness or unpreparedness, the fitness of ministers to conduct colossal operations, the moratorium, etc. No general realisation of the full horrors in store for the world was as yet apparent. The first panic was subsiding. England was feeling its feet.

And the Forsters came to London as though not even war could affect their habits. They came to Sloane Street as they had done for six or seven years, without definite plans, but because they had done it before. Howard had endured the first dread of business failure, and was beginning to realise that if all went as it promised to do shipbroking would stand the strain of war-time. He could not foresee that its profits would increase beyond all expectation. The war filled his mind. His talk was

all about the war, about generals and forces, recruiting, club gossip, and unity. He settled into a rut of argument and assertion, from which nothing could shake him. He was one of the first to abandon his superficial Liberalism. He bought all the newspapers and argued about them. With Marian he did not argue. He almost disliked her, she thought, for being cooler and more resolute in criticism than he was himself. He found her questions embarrassing, because he knew too little of international affairs to enable him to answer questions at all. His reliance upon Russia, his hostility to Marian's distrust (due to her inherent Liberalism) of Russia's Eastern claims, produced in Howard strange emotional waves that took the form of vehement angers. And in anger he could not argue with Marian. He was at too great a disadvantage, as an angry person will always be in face of one who is slow to anger.

Marian was very quiet. Her view of the war was entirely personal. She at once visualised battlefields and bloody wounds. Not immediately did she feel the impulse to work for the relief of suffering; and so she was dumbly afraid of what was going to happen in thousands of households. She foresaw pain and calamity, young happiness destroyed, all the agony of those who lost men they loved. A bitter sense of impotence pervaded her. Gripping her heart there was always the knowledge that she might lose Nigel.

ii

For the first few weeks of the war she had not realised this danger. She knew that, however high-spirited, he was cool in action. If his father had sent for him it was because he was needed in the business. His eyes, she thought, would keep him out of the army. If the first vague fear occurred to her she dismissed it. She was

not one of those Spartan women who began from the first to send young men into the firing line. She was too acutely sensitive to feel that there was cause for pride in their attitude. Hating war, she at first desired only to keep it at a distance from those she loved—in fact, from Nigel. That Nigel was perturbed about his own course of action she knew from his letters. It appeared that he was in several minds. He dreaded any imputation of cowardice; his strong sympathy with other young men filled his heart with a wish to be of their brave number; his temperament as strongly revolted from the thought of war as the final argument in human affairs. For a time he seemed likely to be swept by the deluge; but when it became known that more men had volunteered for the army than could be fed and clothed and armed, his first impulse gave way to one that was more temperate. He worked without check in his father's business, and for that time, at least, seemed to be executing his immediate task. Nevertheless, the knowledge of danger was never absent from Marian's sick heart. Every letter from Nigel was opened with dread. When she came to London it was her first thought to see him and to ascertain from himself what the actual possibilities were.

In these weeks Marian had grown older. She had lost a little colour, and was pale. Her eyes were darker, her mouth more constantly closed. She spoke less, and thought less; but she felt more. Never had she felt so intensely and with such bitter pain. The pain seemed to sink into her heart, that suffered always from a feeling of oppression. If she was superficially patient, she was, when alone, given over to moods of passionate despair. The fact that she could never express her feelings exacerbated them and increased in solitude their power over her. For the first time in her life Marian found herself

in moments of introspection subject to fits of hysteria. Deeply shocked, she exerted the most violent self-control, only to find that it provoked physical reactions the more severe. It was for this reason that she desperately welcomed the change to London. Here, at least, she would see Nigel. Here, too, she would perhaps find sanity and occupation. In the country the suspense had been almost unendurable. Nothing could be worse than that. Even the pain of seeing Nigel would be nullified by the great joy it would carry with it. It was in this mood that Marian came to Sloane Street in 1914. In this mood and another which at times was one almost of recklessness.

iii

For a few days the new surroundings and the need for her attention to many details of household arrangement kept her mind busy. The war was a hideous background—not, as yet, a preoccupation; and the conflicting rumors which at that time kept most London tongues wagging had no place in her thoughts. She was remote from the war. Almost, in these days, she was remote from life. The flat, however clean, required attention. She dined alone; she went out alone; she worked and suffered with no sense of community with others. Her drawing-room, a large one, required rearrangement. Her dining-room needed transformation into something less like a board-room. She was busy—not happy, but simply involved in the daily tasks preliminary to ordinary settlement. As yet, air-raids had not yet become a feature of London nights: the streets were not yet darkened sufficiently to make the evenings a distress to the sensitive spirit.

Then, after a time, Marian began reaching out to old associations. She wrote to friends, and called upon them and received calls. She shopped. At first hesitant about

theatres and entertainments, she found herself recognising that even amid wars—as amid revolutions—the ordinary social life of a people continued with as near an approach to normality as circumstances allowed. And so she once more read the lists of plays to be seen, of concerts to be given. She found that dances were proceeding, and other revels. Uniforms became more numerous in the streets; but they were not as yet the common wear. Girls and women had not become khaki-clad. They were thoughtlessly emotional, fevered with the war and with the excitement of events; but only a few of them seemed to have undertaken more than the manufacture of comforts for the troops. And so it appeared to Marian that life had not greatly changed, but was very much as she had always known it.

She wrote to Alice Mant. She wrote to many others whom she usually saw at this season. For days she hesitated about writing to Nigel, until she received from him a letter which had been addressed to Hippeswell. Then at last she sent him a note, to say that she was in London. It was a note that cost her more pains than any letter she had ever written. For it was essential that it should say no more, and convey no more, than that she would be glad to see him if and when he was able to come. The note was dispatched. Marian waited. The posts became ordeals. Each morning she eagerly turned over the letters that had arrived, a pain at her heart, and the pain deepening at each disappointment. Every day brought her new pain nowadays.

iv

After three days, Marian was in a state of almost absolute dejection. She could not understand Nigel's silence. Again and again she read his letter, trying to discover in what he wrote some explanation of the later

silence. She could find none. The letter was characteristic, and contained nothing at all which could be interpreted as showing a disinclination to see her. It ran:

"My dear Marian,—It seems so long since your last letter that I must ask you how you are and what you are doing. Are you in London now? Do tell me. I have been terribly busy, on very uninteresting work, all connected with shipping and food, because it seems that shipping and food are among the most important things in modern war. I used to think that battles were won by fighting. This is not so, at any rate modern battles. They are won by maps and auxiliary services—and the greatest element of all seems to lie in transport and food. In fact, superficially, modern warfare strikes me as horribly inglorious. For one thing it is on such a large scale, and is so much a question of mathematics and commissariat that the individual soldier doesn't seem to count at all. Very likely that's just—as I said—a superficial view. I can't tell. But it reconciles me a little to the part I'm playing. Do you know, I've lost some of the feeling that I ought to be in the war in an active sense. I've never pretended to you that I wanted to be a soldier and kill my fellow-men. I don't. But, like every other man I know, I'm horribly afraid of being thought a physical coward. Why that should be, I don't know. It seems to me to be primitive. There is so much strutting about in uniform, and the rewards of enlistment are so palpable—I'll tell you what I mean when we meet. All the women and girls seem to be made to secure the enlistment of all the men they know. They begin, at times, to show extraordinary activity to that end. That's another primitive thing, I suppose. A great deal of the booming of war is very insidious, and I'm not impervious to it. I do have, often, a fighting thrill myself. I imagine guns, and skirmishes, and savage fighting with

a sort of passion. Then, immediately afterwards, I get—not craven, but coldly cynical about the whole thing. I talk to myself about the origins of the war, and find myself talking about financiers and the sacrificial instinct and the herd instinct, as if I really could detach myself from the excitements of other people. When any old man begins to talk about the good that is to come out of the war, the improvement in morals, in physique, and so on, I seem to get contemptuous. I don't believe that. Do you? I mean, I don't think improvement comes out of all this loud talk and violent destruction. I'd far rather the simple issue wasn't clouded by all this sophisticated assertion. It seems to be merely so much propaganda, suggested, perhaps, by newspaper articles, but at bottom dictated by beastly cowardice. I don't know. My head is in a swim. I don't know what I think. You don't tell me what you think. I wish you would do so. You seem so awfully far away from me, as though you could see everything without losing your head. I wish you would tell me what you think. Are you satisfied with me? Couldn't you just say—as man to man—what your real view is? I'm not a coward; but I'm not a swaggerer either; and I want so much to do what is right. In so many words, I want to do what you think is right. Forgive me. I know I must not say that. So I do say it.

"Since I saw you I have been thinking a great deal. Partly, of course, about you—knowing you had made a tremendous difference in my life, and in my way of thinking and acting. You must let me say that. It is so funny that when I write to you I seem to feel that I am talking to you, and very anxious to be quite truthful. You remember I said I could never tell you a lie, or pretend. That is quite true. I couldn't. That's why I've tried to say how I feel about the war. I know I can't say anything profound about it; but for me the war boils down

to the problem of my own conduct. Is it a weaker thing to give way to the extraordinary moral pressure of opinion that is driving so many men into the army, or to ignore opinion and do as my father says? He wants me to stay here—not because he's a fool or a coward, but because he needs my help. But those are only minor details, in a way. I don't at present see danger to those I care about, and I can't help feeling that the people who own the country, who are crying out for protection, would be all the better for some humiliation and suffering. That also is a minor detail. What it comes down to is that I care nothing for the wealth of the British Empire, or the predominance of British trade; but am most deeply affected by the thought of other men of my age—good chaps, and brave and honest—going to the war, perhaps to be killed; and my sense of comradeship with them, not because they speak the same language, but because they are men so like myself. With me it isn't the herd instinct, I think, but an instinct to share whatever ills these chaps are going to suffer. Marian, I think it's a difficult thing to be a young man, and a young man with brains, in war-time. Brains are almost always a burden in common affairs. It's not so much that they produce vacillation, though they may do that; but that they make one scrutinise one's self so closely. You, I think, have found a harmony, a way of being always at peace with your own soul. That's so hard for me. I am by turns sceptical and sanguine. Sometimes my brains are in command. Then I'm cold and self-conscious. And then the next minute some other thing in me is dominant, and my brains are pushed aside. I really *am* an invertebrate creature, I suppose; yet I don't think that. I only envy you your wisdom and tranquillity. You know, I think you are rather fortunate not to have this continuous battle within yourself. I know it is due

to some great quality in yourself, but it must be a very beautiful thing to have such a power of—what can I call it?—tranquillity, or self-control, or soul-harmony, or wise detachment? I don't know. You *are* a marvel! Do please write to me soon, and tell me where you are.

NIGEL."

When Marian first read this letter her bitter smile at its concluding lines had remained fixed for several moments. But when she re-read the letter she was no longer bitter. She only felt that her heart was soft towards the writer, so ingeniously accepting her tranquillity as a fact. She was full of scaring pride at his confidence in her, humble before it; and her brain was at work upon the problem of Nigel's character. If she closed her eyes she could see him quite clearly; and that was what made her thoughts of him warm and vivid. To Marian he was known—not in the events of his days, but in his essential nature. Her knowledge of him grew imperceptibly day by day, as though her first imagining had gained the power to attract and incorporate all the little detached perceptions that swarmed in and just outside her attention. She was like a patience-player, turning up a fresh card which transmogrifies the whole array of cards already known. Every thought of Nigel explained other thoughts and gave them coherence and clearness. And Nigel thought of her as living in a harmony of brain and sense spirit! Poor boy! How fortunate that he was blind! Fortunate! Did not her heart say, unfortunate?

V

On the third day, when she was re-reading her letter, by now so precious and so familiar, Marian was surprised to find Howard quite near to her. She must have been

too absorbed to hear his approach. She had no impulse to conceal the letter, but looked up with a rather abstracted air. Howard sat heavily down.

"I'm tired," he said. "Aren't you tired?" He seemed dispirited.

"I don't think more than usual. I've had an interesting afternoon."

"Have you? That's good. I wish I had. Who's your letter from?"

"This one? Nigel Sinclair."

Howard nodded, acquiescingly. He was not at all inquisitive by nature. For a moment he made no comment. Then he casually asked:

"Is he in the army yet?"

Marian's heart went cold. It immediately began to beat terribly. She had to moisten her lips before answering.

"No. No, he's not," she said, quite quietly. Surely Howard would hear her heart beat! To her relief he remained unaware of the storm of emotion which his question had aroused. Half to himself he muttered:

"Hn. Then he ought to be. What's the matter with him? Anything?"

Marian smiled faintly, folding the letter, and keeping it lightly clasped in her hand.

"He had been ill, you remember," she said, in a grave voice. "Isn't it a matter for himself?"

Howard frowned. He looked at his hands. His voice was wholly changed.

"You'd have thought so," he admitted. "At least, at any other time you'd have thought so. Not now. Things are too serious. He's probably got good reasons. He's not the sort of young fellow to shirk, I should think."

"No," agreed Marian. "He doesn't shirk. Howard, I'm glad you said that."

Howard said nothing. He looked at her once, and then got slowly up from his chair. For a moment or two he stood about near the table, as if uncertain what to do. Finally, he was going out of the room, and checked himself at the door.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "I met Tom Mant this morning. Have you seen Alice?"

"No." Marian's tone was almost wondering, so irrelevant did his question seem.

"I asked them all to dinner on Friday. I thought you . . . wouldn't mind."

He then went slowly out of the room, leaving Marian alone with her letter.

CHAPTER II: THE DANCE

i

THAT same evening, when she was sitting alone after dinner, there came a ring at the door, and Edith, the maid who was always taken to London, ushered in a gay party of six or seven people. These were the Twelters, with a couple of young subalterns attached to the younger girl members of the family. The Twelters were old friends, in whose company Marian had often spent hours of superficial enjoyment. They were people who had no idea in life but the desire for gaiety. They danced through the winter; they attended regattas and race meetings; they dropped their g's; and in fact did all that they thought smart people did. But theirs was not vicious smartness. The girls were not rakes, nor the men cads: both alike were merely silly and thoughtless. To them smartness was the breath of life because they had enough money to enjoy it and had not enough imagination to support life without constant excitement. Marian found their society not at all disagreeable; but she did not seek it, and when she had once seen them had no subsequent wish to renew an acute pleasure. Anybody else would have felt the same. The Twelters had thus a floating acquaintance, and never noticed that their friends in general were never the same for two years running. Only to Marian did they cling, because they liked her and because she resembled themselves in no single respect.

The party, pouring into the room, began talking in laughing high-pitched voices. As every member of the Twelter family might (behind a cloth) have been mis-

taken for any other member, it was always impossible to distinguish the speakers, or their ages, or their sex. They all talked at once, all said the same things, all laughed very much at nothing, and all gave the impression of being pleasant, brainless, pleasure-loving, almost-human creatures.

"It's too bad of us to burst in on you . . . How are you, Marian? . . . Come on you two boys . . . Marian, this is Pip and this is Clem: you know them apart because Pip's got white eyelashes and Clem's got six hairs each side of his upper lip . . . How are you, Marian? Isn't the war . . . Having a *rippin'* time. So glad to see you . . . Don't take any notice of her, Marian: how d'you like my little frock? . . . It's *not.* Marian, is it too? . . ." The noisy burble went on, until at last Marian could not bear the ordeal any longer. She quelled them all. She said:

"And what is it you want me to do? I see you're all going on somewhere. Phyllis, you'd better be spokesman!"

Phyllis squared her shoulders in a burlesque way, and with a mechanical gesture adjusted the ribbon that crossed her shoulder. Marian instinctively compared her slimness with the native grace of Cherry, with whom Phyllis was exactly contemporary; and Cherry shone brightened in her memory.

"We're going on to a dance, Marian. These boys are keen to go. It's quite a small one. At the Waggers—the Wagstaffs, you know. You can come away whenever you like. Begins at ten. *Do* come, there's a dear. It'll be lots o' fun."

"Oh, but my dear . . ." She was interrupted by general expostulation.

"Must come. Got to come. *Must* come!" cried everybody, including the subalterns, who were very much

at home in the group, but who sported under their sprightliness a university manner of cultivated languor. Marian surveyed the laughing, empty faces.

"But what about bed!" she cried, laughing.

"Come and have a damn' good time!" said Phyllis, amid laughter at any suggestion so naïve. "Be a sport, Marian."

"'Member there's a war on!" cried one of the other girls. "Business as usual."

"Be matey!" added a young male Twelter. "We'll look after you!"

Why, he couldn't be much older than Robert! Marian thought. Yet his face was flushed, and his eyes glowing like wine, and there was a general daredevil look upon him that betokened headlong recklessness and the embryonic *vivcur*.

"You *must!*" they shouted.

"What a rowdy lot you are!" protested Marian.

"We'll paint the Waggers bright red," promised Phyllis. "It'll be *great* sport! Come on, Marian."

Allured, it may be, by such a promise, or hopeless of making any impression upon such exuberance by means other than rudeness, Marian gave in. She gave one swift glance round at their faces, and went away to find a cloak. The party gave a cheer. It disconcerted Marian to find such noisy, boisterous people (for the elder Twelters were almost her own contemporaries, and yet were as bright as the others); and even when she was looking for the cloak she hesitated further. She did not really want to go. Later, she was to wish that she had not gone.

ii

They all piled into a big car, built to hold six, and capable of holding them all. The subalterns were full of languorous vivacity; the Twelters all talked at once.

The girls on each side of Marian put their arms round her. She felt their bare shoulders against her own, and their soft, warm bodies, and the scent they used. Deafened by the chatter, she could hear no coherent sounds or sentences, and looked from one to the other, smiling, but far away from them in spirit. She had really nothing to do with such unreal people. They had no life. They were like frantically-dancing may-flies, leaping and swooping in the air in their brief fandango of death. How could she enjoy their life? How could she know them, when they were all there before her? Marian shrugged a little, and the two girls held her more tightly. The car raced through the darkened streets. She caught small splashes of light through the windows, and a growl of traffic. And in the heat and noise of the car she sighed from sheer physical exhaustion at so much ferocious madcap excitement.

What *is* it? Marian asked herself. Why do they do it? I couldn't stand it for a month; yet they, because they're inured to it, can't live without this wild shouting and folly; without spending more and more money to no purpose; without feverishly exciting themselves every day. They don't absorb it: it doesn't nourish them at all. No wonder they'll be bored when their animal spirits flag. The doses of excitement will have to be stronger and stronger. They'll find they *must* have stimulant. It will be first of all this, carried to its farthest pitch; then shallow affairs for excitement, and a lot of trumpery intrigue and unhappiness. Then they'll eat and drink too much, and smoke too much, and lose their spirits. Then it will be, perhaps, drugs. And what's the use? They're quite innocent people to begin with: they only get vicious from being exhausted and neurotic! Again Marian shrugged. She had been thinking, as though she were surveying a microcosm, simply because she could not be

personally *of* the party. She could not enter into the restlessness that drove them to semi-articulate speech and slang, without intelligible thoughts, but with only the gabble of their kind. And in spite of that, she liked the children, and thought they were simple in their outlook upon things in general—at bottom better than they would ever become in this incessant scramble for distraction.

iii

Her mood persisted when they had reached the house of the Wagstaffs. There the rooms were all brilliant with lights and pretty dresses, and to grotesque and syncopated music couples were twisting themselves into ungraceful attitudes. As soon as Marian went into the room where the dancing was in progress she had a little shock. Those closely-clasped humans were all absorbed watching their own steps! However sensual the dancing might be in essence, the physical contacts were the merest reward for pertinacious endeavour to dance correctly. Marian watched the laborious feet pushing their way about the floor; and she thought the exhibition deplorable. Only one in a dozen of the people there had the least notion of dancing, or the real dancing temperament. All the rest were performing evolutions.

"Really," thought Marian, suddenly awake. "I've come out in a thoroughly nasty and censorious mood. Oh, what *ugly* music! Or is it so ugly, after all? It's got a sort of ugly fascination. I don't *think* I like it; but I think I might *abandon* myself to a base taste for it!"

Her party had left her, after numerous entreaties that she would join the dance. Arms were raised, hands taken, waists pressed; and the Twelters joined the solemn struggle with the slippery floor. Marian at first could hardly stifle a laugh. Then she felt sad. In France men

were being killed. On the sea and in the mines they were running unspeakable risks in unspeakable conditions. And these bodies, sprawling together, and making futile passes with clumsy feet, were passing the time in a sort of petrified attentiveness as far as possible from the delight of the real dancer. If dancing be in the blood, as it was in Marian's blood, it is an impulse both natural and beautiful. The young people before her were as ready to dance as were the clods of earth at Hippeswell. There was in their bodies none of the sapling swaying of the true-born dancer. Marian thought—of Cherry.

How different Cherry's dancing would be from the uninspired gymnastic of this evening! Marian could see Cherry in her mind's eye as graceful as a young tree before the wind, as full of spirit and litheness as a kitten prancing in the sun. Instinctively she realised that Cherry would love dancing for its own sake; not for its skating intricacies or its crude stimulation of physical desire. She wished Cherry could have been there. She remembered her small disquisition upon dancing, and pride in her own skill. She would be different. She was essentially different from this painfully scraping crew of zig-zaggers. By an inspiration, Marian found her knowledge of Cherry illumined. She knew that she would be delighted to see her again. She was eager for the meeting on Friday.

iv

Presently Marian found a seat; but she no longer watched the dancing. Her mind had gone right away. She was seeing in a vision all the suffering which a great war would cause; and contrasting it bitterly with the scene that strained her eyes at this moment. She was resentful of the stupidity in mankind that could let enormous masses of people become imbued with the desire

to kill each other, that set so little value upon reality as to permit this incongruous pseudo-calisthenic exercise take the place of real endeavour. She had contempt for human kind. It was given over to false gods. How much better were wise people than silly people! Marian became coldly arrogant. She tried to remember a phrase from Plato's " Republic " that had pleased her when she read it. Something about the greatest good. What was it? Had she but known, this was the keystone of her own attitude to life. That is to say, she had unconsciously, long ago, adopted it as a justification of her own temperament. The words suddenly flashed into her mind, and she was tranquillised. The chief good is supposed by the majority to be pleasure. By the wise it is known to be insight.

It was insight that Marian craved. She incessantly sought it. She may have been a dull woman, a woman remote from the pursuit of ordinary pleasures; but at least she had this single ideal. And in a world given over to war and imbecility she knew that, however corrosive her mind might be, her ideal at least was deliberate and constructive. She desired nothing but the improvement of the world. She could accept nothing less than the disinterested pursuit of clear and noble ends. All else seemed to her to be dust and ashes.

v

At last there came a moment in the barren revelry when the room began to empty. The Twelters came in a body to Marian's side, hot and flushed, with a kind of frenzy in their eyes, as though the fury with which they had assiduously performed every necessary step had reduced them to maniacal exhaustion. They rushed her into the supper-room, which was a wild helter-skelter of noise and clatter. People were talking and laughing with silly

frenzy. Corks were popping, knives and forks knocking against dishes. Everything was hot and fervid. Cool drinks, iced cakes, cold meats, were shovelled upon the dancers with the same hectic irresponsibility. The Twelters were all at one table, crushed close in that sardinelike madness that is inseparable from every such revel. They were glitteringly, idiotically noisy and chattering. Their table was but one of many. Its occupants bawled to make themselves heard by one another.

"What a crew!" thought Marian, with distaste. She could not see her own face, which was pale with tiredness. To her this was all merely orgiastic and distasteful. Quite definitely, this was distasteful to her.

And then, she became aware that the next table was even more rowdy than her own. Young men in uniform or evening dress were boisterously laughing, drinking, talking. Girls were smoking through the meal, puffing even between spoonfuls of ice, their legs curling round chairs, their arms sprawling upon the table, their dresses cut low, their draperies thin, their faces distorted with imbecile glee. All were drunk with the noise and excitement. Above the din rose an ugly cracked little laugh that was not happy, that was excited but not merry, a strange discordance. The occupants of the next table were having in excelsis what the Twelters would have called a damn' good time. That laugh jarred upon Marian as nothing had yet done. Passionately, she sought the laugher, pitying her, feeling sorry that anybody so young should have such a silly enjoyment of rowdiness for its own sake. The young men were idiotic; the girls were boisterous and stupid. And the laugher sat with her back to Marian, her pretty neck showing like the stem of some lovely flower. Marian's heart was chilled.

All at once, moved by some instinct, perhaps, that she

was being watched, the laugher turned round and met Marian's grave eyes, that were like steel in their penetration. It was Cherry.

vi

For a moment, and a moment only, Cherry and Marian continued to gaze at one another with a kind of horror. To both the rencontre was unpleasant. To Marian it was the greatest shock she could have had. She had all the evening been thinking with delight of the difference of Cherry from all those whose antics had been so contrary to her ideas of what was good and desirable in a world desolated by violence and anarchy. And she found Cherry in the midst of the assembly, a part of it, as excited and unthinking as any of its members. She stared bitterly at the flushed face before her, which had become so focused that it stood out from all the others. Each instant Cherry grew redder. She was like a child discovered in a fault. Every sensitiveness within her rose to this accusing glance. Rebellion appeared in her, hot and flaming. Then it died. She quickly left her chair and came to Marian's side.

"Hullo!" she said, in a greeting which she strove vainly to make natural. She pressed close to Marian, who rose, still holding her hand.

"Cherry!" she murmured, trying to nullify the reproach of her eyes and tone by a little pressure of the clinging fingers.

The noisy Twelters all watched, their voices dying. Then they resumed. Cherry's companions, after first directing their hot faces towards Marian, fell back to their old chatter. And so Marian and Cherry, standing solitary, were unobserved. Marian seemed to feel her anger evaporate. Pleadingly, Cherry whispered:

"Marian, come somewhere away from here . . ."

"Your friends?" Marian also spoke in a low voice.

"They won't notice. I'm tired. I'll tell them I'm going."

"But, my dear, you can't leave them . . ." Marian was expostulatory, not in rebuke, but in considerateness. She saw again that flash of hard selfishness in Cherry, that blind hatred of any restraint upon her inclination.

"I can. I must. Marian . . . they're nothing to me."

Her words were very low, but in their self-defence they were earnest. She took Marian's arm for an instant. Then she darted back to the other table, gave her decision, left her friends staring, and was back again beside Marian, who had by that time explained matters to the Twelter group. Their outcry was subdued instantly. They all nodded and smiled with cheerful acceptance of such summary conduct. Thus were Cherry and Marian enabled to leave the hot, dazzling supper-room together.

"Where shall we go?" Marian asked.

"Let's go out. Let's go home! We can walk. It's not far. Oh, Marian, *do!*" Cherry spoke desperately. They exchanged a quick glance, that lasted for a perceptible time. Under that pleading appeal, and the eager pressure of the young body to her side, Marian gave way. It seemed to her that Cherry's need of help or of forgiveness—was urgent. She nodded.

"Very well," she said. "We'll go. We'll get our cloaks."

Her arm was held for an instant in gratitude; then, released, it fell gently back, and they crossed the almost deserted dancing-room together.

CHAPTER III: THE WALK

i

WITHIN five minutes they were out of the house, and in the dark streets. Above them the sky was hidden by clouds, which made it at first difficult to see a pathway into the blackness. Closely linked, they walked together at a rapid pace; and Cherry gave little convulsive jerks at Marian's arm. Presently, in a muffled voice, she spoke.

"I know you think I'm a beast," she said. "I am. And yet I'm not."

"I hated that," Marian said, equally confessing. "That place."

"So did I. I don't really like it. I don't." When Marian did not answer, because she could not truthfully and unwoundingly do so, Cherry went on, her voice harder; "I see. You think I do."

"I thought you seemed to," ventured Marian.

"I know. Oh, what can I do!" Her arm grew limp. There was dejection in her voice. "I *do* like it. And yet directly I saw you I knew I didn't really like it. I couldn't bear your . . . your seeing me there. I'm not ashamed—yes I am, though. I *am* ashamed. I don't know why, or what of. To-morrow I shall . . . I expect I shall resent it, and go back to it because I . . . Marian, you understand me."

"Cherry, dear. If I say I do, and then show I don't."

"But you *do*."

"I want to. Why haven't you written to me? Have you been wretched?"

"Oh no. Not at all. It was just seeing you!"

Marian gave a small mirthless laugh.

"What a wet blanket I must be!" she cried.

"You're not!" It was affectionate, defensive. All Cherry's candour was aroused. "It's not that at all. Though I *do* mind what you think of me. Marian, it's no good talking to me about myself—I mean, no good telling me what I ought to do. I'm incorrigible. Mother says I'm "out of hand." I am. But I really can look out of myself. I'm not so silly as to think a thing like this is—good. But I like it."

The violent contradictions of this speech were a key to the perplexities which Marian had in her own mind to encounter and reconcile.

"I'm so afraid of making you think me . . ." If Cherry had been affected by Marian, and afraid of Marian's misinterpretation of her nature, was it not strange that Marian should feel a corresponding fear? She resumed, hastily: "Well, I was horror-struck at seeing you so rowdy. I didn't like it. That's everything. I'm not going to scold you, because that would be idiotic. But I wish all sorts of things, and I like you best when you're as you are now. That's the way I like to think of you. My dear, I think you so much better than those idiotic people, breathlessly watching their steps and sprawling in each other's arms."

Cherry was quite silent. Marian could not perceive whether she was moved and understanding, or merely rebellious at such questioning of her own conduct. They walked for some way without further speech. Then Cherry, perhaps unable to bear any feeling of distance, said in a tone of confidence:

"Yes. I *am* better than them. In some ways. I'm very like them."

"The truth is," Marian whispered in her ear, half-

laughing, but not unmoved, "the truth is that you ought to be well-shaken, you know!"

ii

To herself, she was saying, almost with indignation: "The idea! The idea!" But Cherry invited love; and that, together with a perception of her genuine quality, must be Marian's defence. She spoke again presently, ignoring their previous talk.

"What have you been doing lately?"

The reply was listless, as though it was given with a sort of shrugging.

"Oh, nothing. Playing about, mostly. That's the sort of girl I am."

"An egoist," thought Marian. But she did not say the words aloud. Instead she said: "Don't you think you make the worst of yourself? Or at least, make yourself out rather worse than you are?"

"D'you think I do?" Again that listless tone. "Marian, I'm so tired."

"At twenty-two. I'm thirty-eight. Don't you think I ought to be tired?"

"No," came the surprising answer. "I'm not a bit sorry for you really."

"You want me to be sorry for you."

"No, I don't!" came the quick response. "Not at all. What's being sorry! Being contemptuous! I only want you to understand me. People don't do that. It's such a rare thing. Oh, I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm such a mixture of things, that sometimes I feel almost mad. And then, when I think of you so indifferent . . ."

"So indifferent!" Marian could not repress her interruption.

"So apart from anything. . . . Of course you're not. And I know you're not. We only go back to the

old attempt to define things we can't define. I'm too tired to think properly. I've been dancing every night this week."

"I see," said Marian, with a frown. Her head jerked in impatience. Here was this little idiot wasting evening after evening in this imbecile pastime, liking to do it, quickly sensitive to any suggestion that it was folly. With brains enough to see that there were other goods, she had not sufficient will to divorce herself from this one, or to take it in moderation. She could never attain peace of soul because some vicious impulse in her drove out all other inclinations. Instead, having indulged her craving for excitement, she was enjoying now the neurotic and hysterical pleasure of subsequent self-demolition. That way was the way taken by drunkards, drug-takers, and religieuses. It was intolerable as a kind of conduct. Indignation for a time clouded Marian's mind. Resolutely, she put from her this matter, intent only on leaving Cherry at her own home.

"You're coming to see us on Friday," she said. "You're all coming to dinner. That will be very nice."

As if she had not noticed the iron in Marian's face, Cherry subsided into naturalness.

"Yes," she answered. "Lovely. I've never been to your flat. I've wanted to come. You've been in it some days, haven't you? Mother had a letter."

"Which she didn't answer!" laughed Marian. "I shall lecture her for that!"

Cherry seemed surprised.

"Oh," she said. "How did you know we were coming, then?"

Marian's heart gave a jerk. The speech was a significant one. If Cherry had been dancing a great deal, and if she thought the invitation had come to her mother, and been accepted by her, did not that indicate that she

had not seen Howard? Was the affair then over? That thought flushed Marian, and instantly restored her confidence in Cherry. She could be firm, it appeared. That was something! Nay, it was everything.

iii

It was everything, because it showed Cherry in the last resort mistress of herself. The sense of responsibility which Marian had for her was reassured. If Cherry could break, then whatever her follies she would never, in the expressive phrase of the streets, "come a mucker." She really loved good, and her love of base experience was simply due to curiosity and vanity. Immediately, Marian was her friend again. She no longer hurried. Their common mood was once again cordial. Marian wondered if Cherry ever guessed at the things that were not said between them. She thought that if Cherry knew what sometimes passed in her mind there might be—what? An upheaval? Yes, but only a temporary one. She knew that there is an instinct in human creatures to recover equilibrium; and in Cherry's case she knew that there would always be an easy way. That way would at the lowest be distraction; at the most poignant the finally inevitable self-justification which would throw any critic into a limbo of inferiority.

As they walked, their minds cleared. They began to look about them, observing little specks of light, and stationary or moving vehicles, and passing pedestrians. They did not speak for some time, but directed bright eyes into the gloom. At last they approached Cherry's home, which was in a square off the High Road, Chelsea.

"You'll come in," the girl begged.

"It's one o'clock," Marian said. "How dreadful! I must hurry back. I didn't realise how late it was."

"D'you call it late?" Cherry said, rather sadly.

Marian checked her first impulse to reply teasingly. She knew that it would be inopportune, for Cherry was in a serious and reflective mood, little adapted to the compliment of badinage.

"Remember," she murmured instead, "I'm just up from the ten-o'clock country. In another few weeks I shall be used to London hours."

"Oh, I wish I was in the country," Cherry said, with a sigh.

"The winds will be getting strong; and the leaves coming down. Horribly autumnal. You don't really like the late summer, Cherry."

"I don't mind it. Do you?"

Marian felt her breath catch.

"I do, rather," she answered. "I think it makes me feel . . . perhaps as if I were not quite as fresh as I used to be."

There was a silence.

"All the same, I'd like to be in the country," Cherry said. "And with you. Would you like me to be with you?"

"Very much. But I wonder how long you'd stand it."

Marian could not refrain from that dry speech; but she was sorry as soon as it was made. It sent Cherry thoughtfully indoors.

iv

As she walked home, it struck Marian once again that the most intimate friends must always be strangers to each other. For she could not read Cherry's heart so long as it was guarded; and she could not imagine that her own was readable, since she herself was unable to understand its vagaries. She shrugged a little. What did it matter? What did anything personal matter in the long run? And yet it was the only reality one knew.

People turned to outside things because they had no personal life. And a personal life was the richest treasure in the world, enjoyed only by those in whose natures there was some stirring of poetry. Marian pitied the world, the workers and the players, the sufferers and the exploiters. All of them were helpless in the general complex.

Arrived back in Sloane Street she began to hurry. She had remembered that Howard, on returning, might have expected to see her; that he might be anxious. So she ran the last hundred yards, and entered the flat with her key, feeling rather guilty. True enough, she found Howard waiting in the drawing-room, walking nervously about, and manifestly relieved at her arrival.

"Oh, *there* you are!" he cried; and with a genuine impulse came forward and helped her off with her cloak. "I was begining to think . . ."

"I'm very sorry," apologised Marian. "I didn't mean to be so late. The Twelters came and took me to a dance."

Howard was not at all sulky. He was suddenly cheerful.

"Oh, the Twelters!" he said. "They never occurred to me."

His relief was so evident that Marian wondered what *had* occurred to him. She gave a little laugh. It was so pleasant to find him concerned about her.

"I've been running," she rather breathlessly explained. "What did you think had happened to me?"

Howard's voice had a strange note in it.

"I couldn't imagine," he observed. "I only . . . You see I didn't know *where* you might have gone. And it was so late."

He was so remarkably attentive that Marian looked 'at him with a new humorous curiosity. Why, Howard

was *afraid* of something. Of what was he afraid? Or of whom ? How nice that he should be afraid of anything! Her quick mind raced to possibilities.

"Didn't Edith tell you a party had come for me?" she asked.

"No. I didn't ask her. I thought . . . I thought . . ." Howard stammered slightly. There was quite a long pause. Then, carelessly, as though the name had nothing whatever to do with their conversation, he asked: "Have you seen young Sinclair since you came up? I thought I saw him this evening . . ."

CHAPTER IV: A VISIT FROM NIGEL

i

WITH Howard's last words, Marian felt a quick rise of emotion too hard to be endured without sign. The blood rose to her cheeks. She was stricken with panic. Impossible to tell if Howard noticed the blush: her effort to conceal it left Marian no opportunity for questioning his perception. She could only turn away her head. Where had he seen Nigel? She could not ask. To have done so would have been to betray by her trembling voice that which she sought to hide. But Howard had seen Nigel, and Nigel had not written. She could think of nothing but that. She could only stand stupidly before Howard, like a child, and the blood slowly receded, leaving her quite white, with unsteady knees and a heart that seemed to burst.

Where had he seen Nigel? Here, or at a distance? Where could it have been? With a fierce effort Marian steadied herself. She looked at the clock, and away again. With a sharp little sigh that was meant to be a laugh, she rounded upon Howard.

"Goodness, how late it is!" she exclaimed. "I don't wonder you were anxious. It was thoughtless of me. I shall go straight to bed."

She retreated; but Howard followed slowly, and held the door open for her. At last Marian could bear to look up into that tired face, not less palpably tired because of its fresh colour. Behind the red cheeks there was a greyness. Howard's eyes were the sternly intent eyes of one in pain. But she could not at this moment seek

to assuage any pain he might be feeling. Her own agitation was too great. She looked no higher than his shoulder, and stood veiled and mysterious before him, a secret creature capable of baffling one much more subtle than her husband. If Howard had known, she was then at his mercy, too unnerved to withstand a sudden question. With relief she fled from him, her secret concealed, her unhappiness known only to her own consciousness. Marian felt like one who runs in a dark wood from its fearsome silences. She for the first time for many months locked her door, driven to the act by panic unreasoning in its rush for solitude. When she was alone, and only then, she felt safe—safe from intrusion, and safe from self-betrayal most tragic. Then, too, her expression unguarded, she could at length be natural. Howard had seen Nigel, and it seemed that unless she too saw Nigel she must infallibly go mad with heartsick longing.

ii

During the remainder of the night, Marian slept little. Every now and then, overcome with her wish, she could not restrain the faint moan that rose to her lips. If she could have been sure about Nigel she felt that she could have slept; but the thought that perhaps he had come to the flat after she had left it was torture. Perhaps he had come, and, because she was out, had gone away, disappointed. He might come no more. In vain did Marian think soberly that this might be best for both of them. She was in no mood for reasonableness. It was a mockery to her desire, now too strong to be kept within bounds. Repressed for so many weeks, it seemed to be shrieking within her. She was a sick woman, trembling with all the passionate impulses to love and surrender that beset her so unmercifully. She was hot and weak

and vehement. Love meant to her much more than the physical passion of youth. It was an all-pervading emotion, which had seized her and driven away her resolute defences. No longer was Marian the cool judge of life. She was a suffering woman. To her the sweet joys of love were denied; she had only the pain. She had never known such aching torment.

Even when dawn was in the room there came no release from this agony of doubt. She lay still, facing the window. Through the blinds she could see the light grow clearer, and the sun's first ray made a brilliant streak upon the wall. Then it faded, as slow-moving clouds drifted across the sun's face. So, it seemed, was the story of her love for Nigel. For one day, or for two, it had been a happy, unconscious thing, flaming unnoticed within her heart. Then had come an awakening, an intoxication; followed quickly by her instinctive motion of concealment, of repression. And now, since the clouds had come, it was as though they continually deepened, so that she cowered in a world of unhappy frustration. She had not even the precarious delight of seeing Nigel, of restraining him; or the thrilling sadness of watching his love baulked and dying. She was frustrate, miserable. And Nigel had perhaps come to her . . .

"O-oh!" A long-drawn sigh shook Marian. "What an irony! And what a mad fool I was to deny my love!"

With such frantic thoughts did she make admission of her weakness. At this moment, in such solitude, Marian was no less human than other women. She was in the grip of emotion that left her no peace and no self-respect. Her brain was merely the slave of her passionate impulses, and was powerless to check the flight of her desires.

iii

When it was fully light, and when she was up, Marian was still shaken; but she was once again miraculously herself. She was ready for any emergency, the old Marian, able to meet Howard at breakfast and to face any scrutiny that he might subject her to. No longer were her nerves in tumult. The day had wrought a change in her. Not even she could have explained it. The matter was too simple. It was pride alone that sustained her.

The breakfast was quite a gay meal. Relieved of his first anxiety about her, Howard was recovered from his unwonted feeling of the previous night. Before her calm, he grew more tranquil. He, at least, gave no sign of having penetrated a secret. And Marian, now that the vehement conflict had passed, was afraid of no disclosure. She gave him a cheerful account of the dance, describing with mimicry the invasion of the Twelters and their packed journey to the Wagstaff's house. She pictured the laborious foot-scraping of the dancers; the rowdiness of the supper; her own bewildered disapproval of the tastelessness of the whole demonstration. In memory, the whole thing had composed, and was once again within focus. She was perfectly ironic. Howard laughed roaringly at her account, which made the evening microcosmic. He chuckled at everything, from her selected snatches of the Twelter conversation to her physically-illustrated burlesque of the dancing she had witnessed, from her laughing tale of the supper to the description of her hurried run at the end of the revel. It was all, to him, good fun; and Marian, seeing him so amused, gave rein to her ironic gift, which reduced the evening to absurdity and raised it to an anatomy of current social life.

"Lord, lord!" Howard ejaculated. "What a crew! *What* a crew!" Sobering, he continued: "And to think that this sort of thing is going on—and that it *will* go on—when men are being killed by the thousand. Thank God the war will be soon over. The Russians will end it by Christmas."

"I hope they will," echoed Marian, devoutly.

"No question of it. But I'd like some of these youngsters to realise a war. It would do them all the good in the world."

"They weren't all young, Howard," put in Marian. "I'd like the old ones to realise it, too. But that would need imagination; and you can't expect many people to see things truly, because they don't want to. They'll never want to. If the war lasted ten years, they'd never know. Unless they were starving."

"Oh, I think they would," he objected.

Marian shook her head.

"It's not human nature to understand suffering without experience," she asserted. "Most people can't suffer. Perhaps it's as well. Not real suffering."

"You don't call love suffering?" Howard asked.

Marian sharply sighed. A heaviness came upon her.

"Perhaps," she admitted. "I wonder. Sometimes it's only one's vanity that suffers. If it weren't for vanity, I wonder how many people would think themselves in love."

There was a pause. Howard moved uneasily.

"If you go right back like that," he said, "you won't leave us much, will you?"

They did not continue that discussion. It came too near both of them, and neither was in the mood at this moment to probe beyond superficialities. Both wanted to be cheerful, and to forget whatever inner life they

might have been enduring while the days passed. One cannot always live at a high pitch of emotion.

The meal concluded, the two separated. Howard left the flat for the office: Marian rose from the table and went into the other room, where she sat immovable, staring straight before her, and seeing nothing. Only then did she realise that in the whole of her account of the previous night's doings she had never once mentioned Cherry.

iv

When, presently, she moved about the room, she saw, lying upon the centre table, a large box of cigarettes, which had contained a hundred, and from which only a few had been taken. It gave her a singular feeling to notice that these were Tee-to-tum cigarettes. The fact took her mind back to that evening in June when she had first divined something unusual in Howard's state of mind by his reference to these cigarettes. What had he called them? A silly name of some sort. She could not remember it. The nickname had passed from her recollection. Humming to herself, she took one of the cigarettes and lighted it. Although they were scented, she did not dislike the flavour, and she stood smoking for several minutes, while her active mind went right away and occupied itself with matters of daily urgency.

Later, she asked Edith whether anybody besides the Twelters had called on the previous evening. Nobody had been. It was a relief; but the inquiry started afresh that restless concern at Nigel's silence. If the Forsters had been on the telephone, she would have been disposed to ring Nigel up, and with an assumption of ease to have rallied him upon his desertion. But as there was no telephone, common circumstances put a check upon her

activity. She did nothing. There was nothing to do, now, except to wait. But waiting was hard. Marian went out, and walked about the shopping district beyond Sloane Square, ordering for the day's meal, and buying some flowers for the table. She returned in an hour, feeling weary and unhappy. The shops had provided no distraction. Her mind had gone back to its preoccupation, and she had seen nothing to nourish her healthier interests. But her passion had died. It had been too violent to last. She had begun to accustom herself to the thought that Nigel was not coming. Almost, in this mood of exhaustion, she hoped that he would not come.

V

It was at four o'clock that, as if in answer to this mood, she was stung suddenly into life again by a loud ring at the door of the flat. Before he was brought in, she knew with complete certainty that this was Nigel. Her knowledge was quite definite. Her heart beat fast, but not throbbingly. It was a little faint echo of nervous tension within her breast. As he entered, she was wholly at ease, rising to greet him with a sedateness that would have deceived the vainest of men.

"How are you?" Marian cried. "It's ever so nice to see you again."

Even in speaking, she was searching his face for news of his state of mind. The face seemed to her to be thinner, paler. He came very quickly forward, and, she thought, shyly. His hair was cut shorter; his mouth was more set.

"He's altered. He's altered." Her perceptions were instant. But she was puzzled, also. She knew that he was different. Well, he had been changed at their last meeting. No, this was something more. There was some-

thing she could not define. He was altered in some essential respect. Was it to herself?

"I've been so wretchedly busy," said Nigel, standing and smiling, and looking at her in his shy way.

"Come and sit down. Of course I knew you must be busy. Howard thought he saw you yesterday. Did you see him?"

"Your husband?" Nigel was surprised. "No, I didn't see him. Where was it?"

"I forgot to ask. Have you been working all the time?"

He appeared to flinch at that question. Why?

"No. No, not all the time. I ought to have been. But I've been working so hard—it seems a bad thing to admit—that I've simply *had* to let myself rip a bit. Otherwise, I think I should have gone off my head. This army business has been troubling me a good deal."

"Army business?" Marian's heart seemed to stop beating. Her tone was rough, almost peremptory. "What d'you mean?"

"Only what I wrote to you about. Marian, it's in everybody's blood. You probably can't realise it, coming from the country."

Marian smiled—a slow, bitter smile. She didn't realise!

"No," she said, gravely. Well, there was that. She no longer heard his words. The shock past, she was scanning his features, still at a loss to comprehend the change in him, but more than ever acutely aware of it. Nigel clearly did not recognise the change in himself. Or was it that he was trying not to do so? Or not to let her do so? It was a poignant shock to her. She withdrew, her spirit as sensitive as a snail's horn. There was something inexplicable. Swiftly her mind flew to her agony of the night. The smile deepened, and became

mechanical. Her eyes were like night, hidden, inscrutable. She was stealthily watching him from behind a mask. Strange, strange . . . throbbed her brain. No, she didn't realise.

"Since I wrote, I've been worrying more. It comes and goes. The day's news alters everything—one day shocking, another less tangible. I think everybody's suffering a great deal—mentally, you know."

"Yes," said Marian. "I expect they are, even though sometimes they don't show it! But that's no doubt because it's mental suffering."

Nigel nodded in agreement. He put his hand sharply to his face in a gesture of perplexity. Had he then caught the uncontrollable dryness of her tone?

Tea was brought in before they spoke again; and they sat nearer the small fire. Although the weather was still not cold, there was a fluctuating chill in the air which made a fire welcome. And there were hot scones for tea.

"Don't you think the reason that you are worrying about your own position is that you're not well?" Marian presently asked. "I mean, that you're thinking about yourself in a state of low vitality? Nothing's more depressing than that."

"That's quite true. But it isn't that, at all. I'm very dissatisfied with myself . . . about other things." He looked quickly at her, and away. She caught every movement of his head and his hands, though her eyes were not upon him.

"Oh, yes," said Marian, quite without expression.

"It's no good refusing to recognise the war. A number of people are doing that. They're pretending it's no concern of theirs. You can't take that purely external view. You ought either to join in, or try to stop it."

"You're speaking as a man?" she asked.

"Purely. I've been taken unprepared. I wasn't ready

for it. I'm indignant and bewildered and rebellious. It seems to me that as we've got beyond duelling we ought to have got beyond war. Well, it seems we haven't. Most of the men I know have gone into the army. I don't know what they've said to themselves. They've gone. I think most women are urging their men to go into the army—they like uniform, they're frightened . . . perhaps other causes operate. They may be the clear-sighted veterans they pretend to be. All the girls are for the war and the army."

"Are they?" Marian did not question.

"The only girl I've discussed it with was perfectly clear that I ought to go in."

"You allow a girl to persuade you?"

"No. But you see what a point I've reached, Marian."

Marian restrained a sigh. Her face was perfectly grave.

"I'm afraid I do," she said, soberly. "Have you had enough tea? There are some cigarettes behind you on that table."

Nigel turned round, and brought the box of cigarettes to their table. As he held it out to her he looked at the design upon it.

"Hullo!" he cried, in a puzzled way. "Do *you* smoke old Two-toed-twins?"

Marian's hand was arrested in mid-air. She was robbed of composure for an instant. The room seemed to whirl about her.

vi

They continued to talk, but as strangers. Her heart had closed with a snap. She looked at him with staring eyes of bewilderment. And her heart went pounding on while her brain revolved around the problem of that

foolish nickname. She could not ask him the obvious question—"Where did you learn that name for these cigarettes?" The moment was past for any such inquiry before she had sufficiently recovered from her shock. What did it mean? Her one desire now was that he should leave her. Marian was desperate.

"You must come to see me again," she said, in a steady voice. "I have to go out this afternoon; so I can't ask you to stay. There must be a lot of things for us to talk about. But not now." Nigel rose at once. "Don't let yourself be influenced by anything but your own judgment in this matter of the army. It's your own business entirely."

"So I feel. But I can't help being affected by the prevailing tone." He was quite humble before her. "And it's so impossible for me, while I'm so preoccupied with business, to think clearly. I feel it will be done on impulse. There is every reason I should stick to my work. But that's not everything. It's not simple. Nothing's simple."

"No," said Marian. Her lips framed the word. She did not utter it aloud. Only she wished he would go, and leave her alone with her paralysed heart.

"I'm afraid I'm bad company this afternoon," Nigel ventured.

"I'm very busy myself."

"Not displeased with me?" He was still, it was evident, dependent upon her good opinion.

"How could I be?" Marian took refuge in that, scorning herself for hiding her grief, but driven to concealment by a stronger impulse than that of frankness. "It's five o'clock. I'm so sorry." She followed him to the door. Upon the threshold they stood for a moment. Nigel made as if to speak, checked himself, and went out of the room. Their farewell was said. She was at last

alone. She went back into the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Marian went back to the table, seated herself, and mechanically poured out another cup of tea, which she did not drink. What a fool she had been to look forward so to this first interview. It was always the way that when one had lively anticipations the reality was a bitter humiliation. Had she not learned that from past experience? Sightlessly, she fumbled among the cigarettes. She was conscious of a complete suspension of emotion. She felt like an automaton, unreal and tragic.

"What does it mean?" she presently asked herself. Then, convulsively, she stood up again, her hands to her breast. "Oh, I'm old! I'm old!" cried Marian, her mouth distorted with pain.

CHAPTER V: THREE'S COMPANY

i

ON Friday, at tea-time, Marian was surprised to receive a hasty visit from Cherry. She was sitting alone, and tea was being brought in, when Cherry arrived; and the girl came hesitatingly into the room. She was in a beautifully ductile mood, like a child. Marian, unprepared, was looking up with a faint frown of curiosity at so unexpected a visit upon the eve of the dinner-party; but all her doubt fled before this easy charm.

"Why, come along!" she cried, as Cherry, suddenly roguish, stood before her, enjoying the sight of Marian in a sort of trance.

"I was walking along Sloane Street . . ."

"Splendid. Sit here. It's so cold to-day." Marian moved a chair nearer the little tea-table, while Edith, unbidden, swished in with another cup and saucer, and a plate.

"I say! You do yourself jolly well! Cream!" Cherry pretended to be surprised at luxuriousness. "Mother would have a fit."

Marian laughed a little.

"I must have known you were coming," she suggested.

"I believe you always have it like this," Cherry said, provokingly. "It's quite right. Why shouldn't one look after one's self?"

"One generally does," agreed Marian, drily.

"Most people pretend not to. Like ostriches. I'm so glad you're selfish, too."

"I suppose you think it makes me more human," said Marian. But behind her smile she was quite grave, because she had all sorts of memories pressing upon her. Cherry looked quickly up, but her eyes, meeting those of Marian, skipped away, returned, and again were averted, in a mischievous raillery not unmixed with shame.

"I shan't have much of a chance of talking to you to-night," she announced. "Mother will do all the talking. She does, you know. She's a talker. I think that's why I've learnt to hold my tongue. It's wiser, don't you think?"

"If it's held at the right moment," Marian admitted. "If you hold it at the wrong time you're rather inclined to make trouble."

"For yourself?" Cherry was alert.

"It all comes back to that. Sometimes it's so hard to hold your tongue, and sometimes so easy."

"You hold yours."

"It's a mark of second-rateness to be silent."

The notion came as a shock to Cherry. It was contrary to her belief.

"But why?" she begged, her eyes round. "How oracular you can be!"

"I should have thought that the really wise person had nothing to conceal, and a great store of riches to give to everybody. The wise person has so many points of contact with others. All penuriousness and curmudgeonlessness is inferior. Don't you think so?"

Cherry thought for a moment, her pretty face shadowed.

"Meanness," she said. "Well, what about caution?"

"I'd rather people were generous than just."

"Oh, Marian!" Cherry was laughing aghast. "You wouldn't. Just imagine everybody tumbling over themselves to give. It would be most awfully boring."

"There's no danger," submitted Marian. "Just think of the givers and takers."

"Let's have measure . . . in all things." It was said with mock solemnity. Cherry was thinking other matters, more personal matters. "I want to see things as they are."

"The danger is that one may see them undersized. It's horribly easy to dwarf them by one's own egotism."

Cherry looked a little uncomfortable. For the first time her radiance fell, and a hardness showed in her.

"You're finding fault with me?" she asked, quickly.

"My dear!" Marian was genuinely distressed. "I didn't think we were talking about ourselves. You can't suppose I think myself very generous. Or wise."

"I don't know," Cherry said, in a non-committal voice. "I don't really know what you think. I know I'm very sensitive . . . Marian, I wanted to tell you . . ."

Marian caught a new note of seriousness, and bent a little forward; but she never heard what was to follow, for at that moment Howard walked into the room.

ii

It was perhaps a shock to all three, for this meeting took place after such a long interval, and after what must have been so many hours of painful thought. It was all extraordinarily quiet and commonplace. Howard certainly stopped short. Marian felt that she withdrew, and became watchful—not catlike, but observant of her companions, like somebody who contemplates her own emotion from a place apart. Cherry alone gave no outward sign of discomposure, though she became precipitate in action. She got up from her chair, and moved towards the newcomer with a manner of perfect frankness.

"Hullo!" she cried, in a voice of greeting. "This is

unexpected. I'm just going, Howard. I shall be here again in a little while, with mother and father."

"Hullo, Cherry," Howard responded, and took her hand. He did no more than touch it. Marian saw Cherry's quick glance travel comprehensively over his face, and note his bearing. It was a survey almost methodical—certainly very complete and understanding, but not emotional. She admired Cherry's composure, and saw once again—in a glimpse of truth—the honesty which made that composure tolerable. In her heart she knew that Cherry had played straight. She could always be a woman at need, however childish and selfish she might otherwise seem. But Cherry did not now look at Marian. There would have been a pause, if Marian had not taken part in the talk and saved the momentary consternation.

"D'you want some tea, Howard? I'll order some fresh. I didn't really suppose you'd be to tea; and Cherry's a surprise visitor."

"No thanks." He was gruff, standing there awkwardly before them. "I've had tea. Well, it's very nice to see you, Cherry, after this long time." He was surveying Cherry in a gingerly way, distrusting her, as Marian could see. "It's a very long time—a couple of months."

"Yes. You've been very busy, haven't you?" asked Cherry.

"Very. There's a lot to do now. It takes all my attention . . . How's Robert?"

Cherry shrugged, her mouth curling into a smile of mock-disgust.

"Just as usual. He won't change. *He'll* always be the same fiddler with engines and wheels. All his conservative life. He's a mere cog."

"Yes. And you . . . Have you changed?"

It was daring of Howard to risk that double-edged inquiry, knowing as he did that Marian would read the question to its heart. Cherry moved, almost with a nervous restlessness.

"Oh, I'm always changing," she said. "I'm never the same. Am I, Marian?"

Cherry, it seemed, was glad to have Marian behind her, thankful to have her as a friend. It was curious how aware they both felt of the waves of sympathetic understanding which passed between them. It was no sex freemasonry, but a personal interchange.

"Oh, you're very tangential, Cherry . . ." She hurried to the rescue, but not with a serious wish to interpret a perverse temperament.

"I'm not sure I know what that means," Cherry said, with an impudent display.

"It means here to-day and gone to-morrow," explained Marian.

"It means unreliable," added Howard. Marian shook her head at his obstinacy, and she quickly retorted:

"Or sincere." Marian was now wholly loyal to Cherry, slightly indignant that Howard should so unblushingly take a high moral line, and determined that he should be warned of his error.

"What a tangle!" cried Cherry, as if in delight. Nothing betrayed her chagrin at an accusation. "And what an interesting person I must be."

"Oh, you are," said Howard. His sternness had become fixed; but although his words were impolite his manner was not outrageous.

"We're all interesting—to anybody who takes the trouble to notice it," exclaimed Marian. "At least, it seems so to me. But people won't take the trouble. They're such dull egotists themselves, that they can't spare any attention for others."

Howard looked at Cherry, and Cherry, archly mischievous, her little mouth curled up at the corners, at Howard. Both then, by a common impulse, turned back to Marian.

"She's been like that all the afternoon, Howard. Ever since I've been here, at least. Laying down the law. Of course, she's right; but how trying it is to know somebody who's right—always. You'd give anything to see her tripped-up. I'd like to set a trap for her. It would be great fun. I'll do it one day."

"You wouldn't catch her," Howard said, half-seriously. "She's no fool, is Marian."

Cherry cast a flying glance of comic despair at Marian.

"Hopeless!" she cried. "Howard ought to know. I was afraid so. And what a tribute!"

Her cheeks were pinker. She made a movement, and shook hands again with Howard. Marian followed her, drawn by a little outstretching of Cherry's fingers towards herself. When they were outside the room, Marian could not refrain from kissing Cherry lightly upon the cheek, and the caress provoked a sharp hand-pressure of gratitude. That was the only sign Cherry gave of having been greatly moved. Then she was gone, and the field was left to Marian and to Howard.

iii

When Marian went back into the room, Howard was exactly where she had left him. His head was sunk into his shoulders, and he stood like a stock. A bitter expression was upon his healthy face, and his manner was slightly morose.

"She'll be back in a couple of hours," Marian said. "It was just a sudden whim to call. She came about nothing. As far as I can remember, at least."

"She didn't expect to see me," Howard answered,

rather grimly. "It came as a bit of a surprise to her."

"You *are* early. Was it anything special!"

"No," Howard said awkwardly. "What should there be?"

When a man is defiant, his wife always supposes a reason; and Marian's eyebrows arched at his question.

"I just meant, was there some news, or were you tired," she explained. Oh, these words of one syllable, to avoid misconception!

"I was tired. I wanted to be home to tea."

He was quite short with her, short and resentful of her curiosity. So Marian let him continue silent for some time, while Howard, stretching his hands to the fire, sat in Cherry's vacated arm-chair and thought heavily.

"Nobody else been to-day?" he asked, at length.

"No," said Marian, wonderingly. What was the matter with Howard? She could not tell. It was something not to be explained, except that he was emerging from his passion for Cherry and was conscious of a crackling loneliness and desire for his wife's healing company. Was that it? But, in that case, why the irritability? She had been accustomed to contrition. It was very strange, and not at all amusing. Moreover, Howard's mind went to and fro among the words they had exchanged. He returned to Cherry's visit.

"I wonder why she came," he said, aloud.

"Cherry? Just a whim, I think."

"Wanted to see you alone. The first time since she was at Hippeswell." He was elaborately the tactician.

"She was just cheerful. And it *isn't* the first time I've seen her. I ran into her the other evening, and we had a talk."

"Oh." He was sharp in taking her up. "You didn't say."

"I must have forgotten," said Marian.

He was afraid to ask her any more; and presently went out of the room. And after he had gone, Marian remembered that Cherry had been upon the point of saying something when Howard first appeared. What had she been going to say? "Marian, I wanted to tell you . . ." Oh, it couldn't have been anything at all. Except about Howard, and Cherry would hardly have broken silence on that subject. Marian resolutely put the question out of her attention. She had spent the day in refusing to think.

CHAPTER VI: THE QUESTION

i

THE evening came, and it passed; but Marian had no personal talk with Cherry, because Alice Mant was so full of her own garrulity that no other person was able to converse. Marian was heartily tired of her by the end of the evening. She more than ever sympathised with Cherry, who might have been driven by such a heedless, unimaginative woman into the very sickness of revolt which her mother feared and which she tried to avert. As a result of this incessant monologue, Marian did not learn what it was that Cherry had wished to say. The parting came without any clarification; and thereafter Marian spent some bitter moments in thinking of Alice and her failure. How much misery and wrongdoing were caused in the world by inefficient mothers! It was a subject inexhaustible in its variations. In the particular instance, there was sufficient reason why Cherry should fail in some respects to conform to accepted standards of conduct. The evening ended with a feeling on Marian's side warmer than it had ever been towards Cherry. She seized the moment of departure to give Cherry an emphatic invitation to come often to Sloane Street. If reward had been needed for such a piece of kindness it was to be found in the look of gratitude which accompanied Cherry's eager "Really? Really would you like me to come?" It was as though Cherry had said, with all her heart, "You are my friend." Was not that a triumph for Marian?

ii

And on the afternoon of the following day, to Marian's secret distress, Nigel came again to tea. He arrived early, without warning, and he was both pale and constrained. As soon as she saw him, Marian knew that nothing could make their interview satisfactory. She felt her heart cold within her; she read in his face the signs of an intense preoccupation. Her mind flew back to their last meeting. She recalled it in detail; but she found herself lethargic and unresponsive. She was conscious of low vitality, of a stupid inability to rise to any demand Nigel might make upon her mood. She felt old and uncomfortable. And all the time watchful of the change that a few weeks had wrought in him. To her eye he seemed to look extremely ill. His colour had faded, his skin was slightly roughened, his lips were a little swollen. His eyes had lost some of their lustre; and his expression was that of one pathetically ill-at-ease. Why? Marian had no means of knowing. Things had happened of which she could form no opinion.

They met, nevertheless, with the old lowered tone of intimacy, and their hand-clasp was warm. Marian established him in comfort, and took her seat opposite. She had not long to wait before Nigel began to explain the occasion of his call.

"I've come before I meant to," he said, frankly. "But it's because I've been thinking a great deal since I was here last. For one thing I've come to a half-decision."

Marian's heart began to beat. How strange that she had thought herself completely steeled! She had not wanted him to come; she had been sorry at his entrance; and now, in an instant, all that aversion was dispelled. It was gone, like a mist before sunshine. So all lovers have these fits of disinclination, followed by moods of

almost rapture in each other's company. Marian was excited, apprehensive. She listened with intentness.

"What is it?" she asked, and did not guess how tenderly betraying was her voice.

"For this moment," Nigel hesitated, "it's . . . well, I've practically made up my mind to go into the army."

"Nigel!"

"Oh, it's not fear, or enthusiasm . . . It's something else, that I can't explain because I don't understand. It's not a sense of duty. It's simply that I've lost grip of my own self. Marian, things have begun to be absolutely intolerable."

"What things?" She pressed him to reveal the influences at work. Nigel shrugged, looking away, looking anywhere but at Marian, who watched him with a fresh and deepening pang.

"I can't tell you," he murmured.

"Then I can't help you," said Marian, deliberately. Emotion made her hard. She was possessed by the instinct of jealous cruelty. Nigel started, still not looking in her direction.

"Only by . . . understanding," he said, quietly.

"Which you don't allow me to do," persisted Marian.

"I would if I could." He moved again, uneasily. Then gave a short melancholy laugh that froze her. "If I understood myself I'd tell you. But I don't."

"You think I'm failing you?" Her voice was hardly audible. There was a long pause, during which they continued to sit by the fire, while the noises of the street went on, and the whole world thundered upon its way. Only Marian and Nigel, it seemed, were silent, searching hearts and consciences for some elucidation of this snap in their understanding.

"Is that so important?" Nigel said at last. "No, I don't think you're failing me. The whole fault's mine.

I'm invertebrate. I ought to come to you with a mind made up; and then you'd be able to change my mind and my heart. If I'm uncertain you'll be uncertain."

"I don't want you to . . ." Marian checked herself. "You must do what you think right. If you're not sure it's right, you ought not to do it."

"I'm the person least involved," Nigel said. "The whole world's involved, and I'm the merest little fraction of flesh in it."

"And spirit," urged Marian. "Don't forget that, Nigel. It's not what one does that matters. I mean—just does. It's the reasons that matter. They're the really essential things. If you do a brave thing from a cowardly motive, you fail."

Again Nigel shrugged.

"Is your choice as simple as that?" he asked.

Marian flinched. A wave of anger seized her. Was he so obtuse? Had he *no* conception of what she might suffer in life? A dead feeling of failure overwhelmed her.

"I should have thought not," she answered, coldly.

It brought him up sharp. At last he turned fully towards her; and Marian saw the suffering in his face. He was in acute distress.

"I'm sorry. That's the point I've reached. I can't tell you why. All sorts of things enter into it. All the inexplicable criss-cross of motive and impulse—what one wants, and hates, and fears, all going on at the same time. I didn't realise until the war came what an amazingly weak person I am. It's horrible to be sensitive and to think. If one's stupid, or merely emotional, or merely philosophic—how simple everything becomes! But I'm not stupid. And to have brains and a heart as well—I don't think any suffering can be more acute."

"And it's more even than that," Marian said, quietly. He stared.

"Oh, much more," he admitted. "And it's all going on at one time."

Marian fell into slow thought. It was not now the flashing of intuition that made her brain dart hither and thither among suppositions. Intuitions were numbed. She thought quite clearly of Nigel's nature and of his problems.

"And you're getting no nearer a solution?" she asked, at last.

He groaned. His head sank upon his hand.

"Only cutting the painter. Only throwing personal responsibility overboard. Only putting everything on the one throw—in the hope of simplifying."

"That's despair," Marian said, quickly.

"It's shame. It's confusion. It's loneliness—neuroticism. Anything you like. But at least I'm blaming only my own nature. I'm not blaming life, which is what despair does."

"I wonder." Marian said the words aloud. To herself, to that purely feminine self that ran headlong to conjecture upon simple lines, she said: "What is he talking about? What has happened to him? It can't be only the one question."

iii

Edith brought in the tea. Nigel roused himself, and sipped at his cup of tea. Already, having been as emphatic in demonstration of his weakness as a young man could be, he was better. She saw a clearer light in his eye. He was still the man she had realised. This mood was not the real Nigel; but some simple manifestation due to a period of great stress. With his changed position he became a changed man. She was once more in

touch with him. But he was still not at ease, and she, sympathetically, was still disquieted. Her busy mind went on, weaving a story out of her intuitions.

"How's your husband?" Nigel unexpectedly asked. His tone stabbed her. Yes, he was altered.

He spoke quite naturally of Howard. Marian sat with bowed head.

"Oh . . . he's very well," she said, in a drawling way that hid her emotions. "He's busy, as everybody is. And he's worried about the war. And he's . . ."

"I suppose *his* problems are very simple?" Nigel inquired.

"Yes, quite," agreed Marian, conversationally. "His nature's simple. He's got a practical mind, that is engrossed with one idea at a time."

"He's very fortunate," said Nigel, only half-attending.

Suddenly, as though the mention of Howard, and her own pain at its coolness, had supplied her with a link hitherto wanting, Marian had a curious shock. She felt all the blood leave her cheeks. A deadly faintness seized her. Nigel appeared in a grey haze before her. For an instant she feared loss of consciousness. Then she gradually recovered, and was again cool; but in her eyes might have been read a new agony, just born, just passionately working in her system, fruit of this single imagined thing. Never before had Marian had so extraordinary a moment of pain and intuition. She moistened her lips, and moved a little forward in her chair. When the chair creaked slightly, she gave a shudder that ran through her whole body. Yet when she spoke Marian's voice was normal.

"You'll have some more tea; . . . some cake?"

"No, thank you." Nigel's thoughts were far away. He was evidently recalling their talk, for he burst out: "I say, you've been most awfully patient with me. You know how grateful I am, don't you."

Marian's smile was unreadable.

"I *am* rather patient, aren't I!" she assented drily. "I've got such a lymphatic temperament. It's a great advantage." She met his suspicion with imperturbability. "Very largely, it's a matter of age, I think."

Nigel, unable to satisfy himself as to her meaning, was silent, puzzled.

"I wonder if you're lymphatic," he said at last.

"Oh, very," she assured him. "And all that question of blood-heat comes into it, too. You remember you once wanted to apply such a test? That was when we first met."

"You remember that?" asked Nigel, eagerly. "How pleasant that was."

"Yes." Marian, her eyes half-closed, prepared her bombshell. "Won't you smoke? Won't you . . . have a . . . Two-toed-twin?" She was breathing hard and her breast rising and falling in rapid excitement.

Nigel started. And looked at her astonished.

"Do *you* call them that?" he demanded. A faint colour came into his cheeks.

"Isn't that—it's a horrible stupid name; but isn't that what they're called?" Marian's face was like marble. Her eyes glittered; her mouth was set in a smile that held all her cruelty. As he took a cigarette, she waited. Then at last, very slowly and quietly, she said: "Have you seen Cherry Mant lately, Nigel?"

iv

And then Marian was afraid to look at him! A dreadful cowardice took possession of her. She stared straight at the brightly-burning fire, and took a sip from her tea-cup, and waited for his reply. It came at last, in a dry voice, very low.

"Cherry? Oh, yes, I've met her several times . . . at dances."

Marian heard herself saying:

"It's so early for dancing that I can't realise how much things are changed nowadays. Presently we shall have dancing all the year round. And then it will suddenly go fut, and nobody will dance at all, I suppose. *I* met Cherry the other night at a dance. You weren't there, though . . . at the Wagstaffs' house."

"I was going. I didn't go. Was Cherry there, then?"

"With a party." Marian would not spare him. At last she recovered from her paralysis. She could read nothing at all from his voice or his face. Whatever opportunity she might have had of noticing the effect of her question had now passed. Only, she was now in possession of an essential fact. He and Cherry had met. Was not that enough, she told herself in savage self-torture, to ensure a wakeful night or a broken heart? Was it not enough to stun her, to open up new vistas of unbearable pain? And, after that, what? After that a vengeful madness? She was shaken with hatred of Cherry.

CHAPTER VII: BETRAYAL

i

SHE was shaken with such hatred that when Nigel had gone, and when the full flood of her suspicion gushed wildly into definite accusation, Marian had ado to keep herself from screaming. As it was, she uttered no sound, made no movement; but with the fateful cramp of the self-controlled woman endured torture the more terrible for the suppression of every outward sign of illness. She was mordant in her thoughts of a treacherous Cherry, of a girl who lied and lied again with inconceivable effrontery. Every hitherto-loyal perception of Cherry's truthfulness, of her modesty and candour, and her young impulsiveness, went flying. The girl became in this frenzy of jealousy a depraved wanton, capable of every enormity. Shock after shock of disillusion went through Marian. Every least expression upon that pretty face which had shown the temptations to which Cherry was subject came back to her memory, fighting and struggling for mastery over her judgment. All her kind thoughts of Cherry were seen to be the folly of deliberate blindedness. Marian was beside herself. Her brain had become the slave of her emotion. Thoughts of Cherry so base that in a normal mood she could not have conceived them flashed woundingly into her mind, and grew together until they made there a great tower of hostility. Thoughts that were biting speeches of reproach, of condemnation, came out of the chaos of Marian's torment. Every reserve and every reservation

was torn away in this sharp naked venom of hatred. Never once did she think of Howard or Nigel as anything but as instruments in the hands of a Cherry calculatingly and inescapably wicked. It was for Cherry alone that she felt this anguish of hatred. She had no single feeling that was not bitter. The whole of life seemed to her to be one intricate mass of horror. Motive and counter-motive, illusion and disillusion . . . these were her obsession. But at bottom it was the madness of love that gave fury to Marian's imaginings—the madness of love struggled against, love invincible, love now cast bleeding at her feet, a dishonoured corpse. That this violence of imagination was built upon so slight a fabric but added to Marian's sense of grief. She had lost her precious reserve, that self-respect which had saved her all along from the excesses of suspicion. It was shame as well as suspicion that now heightened her hysterical suffering. She stopped at nothing. Everything that was bad in her came out, like another woman's coarseness in a quarrel. All she had ever noticed of women's deliberateness in love hurried to her attention and increased the wildness of her accusations. Nothing could check the flood of her anger and her vehemence.

She saw Cherry without judgment, but with the piercing eye of jealousy.

ii

This mood lasted long. It lasted throughout a lonely evening, until Howard's return after dinner; and it was resumed when she went to bed, until, exhausted with so much nervous travail, Marian fell asleep and dreamed of Cherry and herself.

In the morning her body ached as though she had been beaten. She lay heavy-lidded and forlorn, filled with a sense of stale anger that brought disgust in its

train. There stole back into her mind the thoughts of the previous evening; but she expelled them with a weary effort. She was worn out, and incapable of continuing in the same state of fever. It was not that her attitude had changed. She still disliked Cherry with an ugly aversion; but the hysteria was less. A brooding helplessness had replaced it—not the morbid self-depreciation of the habitually hysterical woman, but a sheer physical tiredness and disgust which made her brain sluggish. The suspicions throbbed on, nagging her. She could not, she *would* not, think of Cherry or of Nigel. She was left with nothing to think of but the war—the war which was engrossing the attention of everybody in the civilised world, as a malignant background to their own insistent personal experience.

Marian thought about the war much as other intelligent women thought about it at the time. It was a fascinating horror, a definite stir to the nerves and challenge to the spirit. But she had not yet awakened to the war at first hand, because during its progress, apart from learning the news of calamitous events, she had been obsessed by matters of immediate domestic significance. She had been in love. She was still in love. The war remained a background. Only now was it encroaching upon her own life, and even in this encroachment the war, and its effect in taking Nigel from her side, was less than the sense that Nigel was being drawn from her heart. Still the war lay somewhere vaguely "out there," beyond a sea, far away from the tiny tragedy that went endlessly on in her own nature.

If Nigel went to the war. What then? He might be killed. She shuddered, turning sick at the vivid mental picture of his dead face. Or he might be shockingly injured, blinded, destroyed as a human creature. He might be so changed by experience as to be irrecoverable.

She might never see or hear of him again. Well, if he loved another woman—no thought of any inconstancy of his ever entered her mind—he would be equally lost to her. Did he love another woman? Her jealousy said "yes." She had nothing in her heart but a certainty of suspicion. Cherry . . . "mooning off with some fellow" . . . Wearily, she turned her head upon the pillow.

iii

With terrible dexterity her mind probed into Cherry's mind until she was incapable of the energy required for the exercise. It seemed as if her knowledge of Cherry had been suddenly increased. It was a nightmare, from which she shrank. Only very slowly did judgment re-assert itself; and even then it was judgment at the mercy of any quick memory and interpretation of memory that might flit into range of her attention. She was coldly unhappy, with fierce irruptions of heat due entirely to the fact that Cherry was another woman. Her jealousy was not of any quality in Cherry that she did not herself possess—except the one priceless quality of youth. It was purely sexual jealousy; and that was what made it a madness in her blood.

Wearily Marian rose, and dressed, and breakfasted. The morning paper had been cast to the ground; Howard's coffee-cup stood still upon the table; the toast-rack had been replenished. Marian's head ached. She walked with languor, dreary and unhappy. She could eat nothing. The morning was rainy, and she felt that winter was here. Little puffs of smoke were blown from the chimney and into the close room. She looked round at the bare furnishings with distaste. A quick longing for Hippeswell came into her heart. That was her home: this, whatever its permanence, would never be anything

but a *pied-à-terre,* and unsatisfactory at that. But it was her mood alone that dictated the dislike she felt. At Hippeswell she would have been equally dreary, for she was worn out.

To go out of doors was at first an impossible thing to contemplate; but after an hour or so she was driven forth by boredom. She found her mackintosh, and some stout boots, and, thus clothed, went into the rain, walking with nervous rapidity among the roads and squares of the district, noticing dishevelled sparrows, and pedestrians, and taxicabs with their splashed windows drawn fully up. Within those cabs were other people, perhaps as unhappy as she, perhaps triumphant with joy. More likely, she presently thought, they were being driven, preoccupied with tedious routine, from place to place in this dull city of bricks and hearths and triviality. It was a doleful morning.

iv

With the afternoon, Marian became so tired that she could not sit upright. She went to her bedroom and lay down, and was soon fast asleep. Two hours passed, and still she slept. She awoke, with her temples aching, to find Edith in the room, tiptoeing to look at her.

"Please, ma'am, a young lady . . . Miss Mant . . . I told her you . . ."

"Miss Mant?" Marian felt her heart give a bound. Had Cherry the impudence to come here? How unspeakable! Ah, but she had been the other day, the other night. She had merely come again. There was no limit to her effrontery. Marian sat up on the bed. "Tell her . . ." A quick struggle took place in her mind. Tell her I'll be there in a minute. Good gracious! Is it four o'clock?"

As Edith withdrew, Marian hastily did her hair. She

could see that her face was very white, and the pupils of her eyes so large that they covered nearly the whole of the iris and gave her whole face an appearance of nervous tension. For a moment she regretted having said she would see Cherry. Then a recklessness succeeded. What did it matter? She was ready to meet any scrutiny. In that mood she entered the drawing-room.

Cherry, who had taken off both mackintosh and hat, and was standing with flushed cheeks by the fire, came more than half-way to meet Marian. Her blue eyes were alight, and her fair hair full of new little curls which had been called into being by the rain.

"Hullo, Marian," she cried. "Look here, I hope I haven't been a beast to interrupt you! I wanted so much to see you . . ." The words stopped abruptly. Marian saw the face so near to her own swept with a sudden alteration. "You're ill," concluded Cherry. "Oh, my dear, how did you get ill?"

It was then that Marian saw how far from well Cherry was. With her first radiance of meeting dissipated, she too showed signs of nervous fatigue. Marian's examination was remorseless. Cherry's face was subjected to unpitying scrutiny.

"I'm quite well," Marian said, gravely. "I don't like this weather. Several things I don't like."

"Will it bother you to have me here?"

So Cherry thought to play the innocent girl? Or was it genuine? That doubt came into Marian's mind, checking her. She replied, still coolly:

"On the contrary."

"You're being polite," Cherry said. "You needn't. I don't like people to be polite to me. I'm Cherry, you know."

Marian's chin hardened. She was in the mood to say: "You'll accept what you get from me. Be thankful it's

no worse than politeness." Aloud, she drily made answer.

"Yes, I know you're Cherry."

If Marian hardened, so, at that, did Cherry. Marian saw quite clearly the stiffening that came upon her—the sudden wariness that came into her expression. Such a perception did not increase Marian's charity. It confirmed her mood. The two sat down, tongue-tied for a moment.

"Beast of a day," Cherry announced. There was even a subtle change in her voice. It had become the merely conversational voice of one who went to parties. Intimacy had fled. Well, Marian had her own power in such a talk as this would be. But it was one thing to imagine Cherry in absence; quite another to deal with Cherry in the flesh. So must it have been with Marian also. They sat looking at each other, estranged.

"Yes, it's a horrid day. I went out this morning."

"But you're not well, you know." Cherry was looking with a flicker of affection, half-pleading to be accepted upon the terms of their last talk. Marian was not in the mood to respond.

"Who could be well in such weather?" she asked. "I suppose you've been dancing since I saw you last?"

"No." It was a small voice that spoke. "I was at home each night."

"What do you do with yourself then?"

"Nothing, mostly. Just think. And worry."

"Worry?" Accusingly Marian looked at Cherry, and Cherry, who seemed nowadays to be as quick as Marian in reading words and tones and expressions, proceeded no further with her revelation. Marian saw her own mistake, but she could not command herself at once to rectify it. Several seconds passed before she could proceed; and then Cherry's impulse had died. Again they were polite, watchful strangers. "I shouldn't have

thought you had anything to worry about," said Marian.

"Shouldn't you?" asked Cherry. "Well then, I can't have, can I?"

V

Marian thought for a moment. She had suffered too much to be kind. And even in her coldness to Cherry she had some irritation at the girl's egotism. The "I'm Cherry," as though that justified everything, exasperated her. Not only for itself, but because it played havoc with her suspicion of design. No designing person was arrogant in this way—coaxingly arrogant. And yet the facts were known to Marian. She knew about the affair with Howard; she knew that Cherry had been seeing Nigel. The assumption that she had changed him was unproven. Marian looked at the piquante little face, at the pretty, graceful body, and the sensitive hands. She sighed. Oh, no, this was the end of her tolerance of Cherry. She knew too much about her. Too much. She had suffered too much upon her account. Nervously, her wish was to cut adrift from all the people who had taken part in the last three months of her life—to cut adrift and go quietly back to Hippeswell, where she would go about her daily tasks and slowly perish, dying of lost interest in the fact of living.

All this time Cherry sat opposite, and seemed to ignore Marian. She had worn a ghostly smile that made her look like a baby, but her eyes had been hidden. Suddenly she slipped down from her chair, and knelt by Marian's side. Her arms were stretched across Marian's lap, and her soft breast against Marian's knee.

"That was beastly of me," she whispered. "I didn't mean to say it." Marian remained rigid. "But you were beastly, too . . . Marian."

This is the way she coaxes everybody, thought Marian.

It's altogether too easy. Her heart was in no degree softened by the appeal; but she put an arm round Cherry, and let the girl's hair touch her lowered cheek. Cherry's body gave a jerk, a slightly increased pressure: then the pressure died. The caressing life went out of their contact. They were two people in sundered moods once again. At last Cherry raised her head, and their eyes met. A very sad expression overspread Cherry's face, and her lips trembled.

"I know I'm an awful beast," she whispered.

"Sometimes I think you *are* rather a beast," Marian said.

"But you can be, too," urged Cherry.

"Not such a mischievous beast."

"Or so unhappy. . . ." It was pleading. Again Marian was brought up against that confident faith in her inability to feel—she, whose whole life was feeling! So it had always been; so it would always be. Indignantly, she responded:

"Of course I never have anything to make me unhappy." Her voice was rough with pain.

"Only me," whispered Cherry. "And I don't mean to do it."

Marian started. She looked at the white face close to her own.

"Cherry, what do you mean?" she asked.

"Cherry's cheek was against hers, a soft cheek like the petal of a rose.

"I don't know," she said, in a low voice. "Only that I'm a beast, and can't help being a beast. Sometimes I try so hard—really, I do, Marian. And then . . ."—her voice sank still lower—"then I don't try so very hard . . ."

"And you expect me to go on loving you?"

Cherry's eyes were closed for an instant. Marian

felt her head shake, and again the penitent touch of her soft cheek.

"No I don't. . . ." She pulled sharply away. Her voice changed, hardened. "I don't deserve it. I wish I did."

"If you tried hard enough . . ."

Again that shaken head, that muffled tone, almost despairing.

"I can't. It's no good. I just can't." Urgently, came the whisper: "What's the matter with me?"

It was Marian's turn to sigh.

"You want a good whipping," she said, fiercely, trying to speak in a joking way, and most lamentably failing. "A good whipping and punishment. . . . And not all this petting and wheedling and philandering and folly." Emotion had carried her indictment beyond what she had meant. Her heart was plunging.

"Philandering!" cried Cherry, kneeling directly upright. "Marian!" Then her body relaxed. She seemed to kneel, crumpled, upon the floor. Her hands were raised to her face. Almost weeping, she demanded, in a murmur: "You think that of me?"

"Are you so ignorant of what you do?" Still Marian was accusing.

"Oh, . . . but . . ." Cherry seemed to be in a dream. She rose to her feet, and her fingers were spread over her eyes, as though they burned unbearably. "Marian, d'you suppose I've got no *heart?*"

"Vanity, perhaps," Marian said, with bitter sadness. "How much love do you give? How much love, when it means sacrifice? None. You take—yes! But give. . . . What can you bear to give? When love is all giving! You're selfish and thoughtless. . . ."

"From *you!*" Cherry was chilled with horror.

"Think. It was you who . . ." Marian checked

her tongue. "Listen, Cherry. When you came to Hippeswell . . ."

"I know! I know!" cried Cherry. She knelt again by Marian's side.

"You came back to London. You met Nigel Sinclair——"

"Nigel! Oh, Marian——" It was a sob, a sigh. Still the indictment continued.

"You saw him constantly. You urged him to say nothing to me about your meetings."

"That's not true. Can you think I'm so treacherous!"

"You've driven him into the army through your vanity."

"No, no. . . . Marian I can't bear it. I can't bear it!" The white face was very close to Marian's own; and Cherry's eyes were staring with horror. "I never did that."

"You've deceived me; you've thought only of yourself . . ."

"I didn't mean to deceive you. I didn't think of it. I'm thoughtless, but I'm not wicked. I was going to tell you when Howard came into the room. And I haven't driven Nigel into any action at all. Why, how *could* I?"

"He's going into the army."

"Not through me."

"You urged him to it. D'you think I don't know? Not from any motive but your own vanity."

Chokingly, the words of both were mingled in a single protest—the one at such conduct, the other at such an accusation. Both were now silent, breathing quickly, both in passionate turmoil.

"I think you must hate me," Cherry said, half-crying; her voice a wail, her eyes brimming with tears. She, it seemed, could in her turn accuse.

"I think I do," answered Marian, frankly, and with

none of the venom she had been feeling. "Sometimes." It seemed like a revelation.

vi

Thereafter, they both became more composed, and spoke in ordinary voices. It was as if they were two ladies at tea. Their chat upon ordinary topics lasted for fully ten minutes. Then Cherry made preparations to go.

"I suppose you don't want to know me any more," she said, in her hoarse little voice of humility. "As you think I'm . . . all that you've said." She was now, at last, speaking from heart to heart, without disguise, and quite ingenuously appealing for belief in her own honesty.

"If what I've said isn't true," answered Marian, steadily, "you can show me that it's not. I don't quarrel with people."

"You just drop them." It was a sharp retort, won from a deeply wounded pride.

Marian shook her head. Was she so misjudged? Did Cherry only think her so cold?

"I'm too fond of you to do that," she said, in a sober way. In the end, she could still not bear that Cherry should remain ignorant of her love, of her chagrined and thwarted love.

"Marian! *Are* you fond of me?" Cherry took an impulsive step. "It's splendid of you to be. You know . . . I'm very fond of you. I don't know anybody like you. Do let me say it. I couldn't hate you, even after what you've said."

Marian looked steadily at her; but Cherry's response was equally steady. When they kissed, Cherry's arm stole up to Marian's shoulders, and two small sobs were heard before an entirely composed young woman drew away, and went to the door. Again Marian had been the

only person in the world to see Cherry's heart. Again she had been conquered by Cherry. And her feeling was comparable to that which she would have had after a heavy thunderstorm. Alone, she folded her arms. The agony was allayed. Not so the steadily realistic knowledge of life and character.

CHAPTER VIII: THE LOVER

i

FOR a week Marian saw and heard nothing of either Nigel or Cherry. The war was beginning to take sterner hold of everybody. She could not go out in the streets without seeing flaming placards; her acquaintances talked of nothing else; Howard returned from his office at night with a sombre thoughtfulness unlike his customary manner. He heard all the rumours, and now, significantly, bought many newspapers, striving to grasp the issues and the details of the spreading campaign. He was considerably quietened. She thought him improved. More and more he relied upon her, because he respected her judgment. There was something in his way of looking at her, and speaking, that began to impress Marian as extraordinarily pathetic. After the first weeks of wildness, he had done one thing which many of his age had failed to do—he had kept his head. He did not exaggerate the German wickedness, and yet he did not minimise it either. He was neither chauvinist or pacifist; but revealed a patience and a power to conceive a vast threat to humanity which Marian had not expected. The fact that he did this, and that he was back again at her side, without demonstrativeness or sentimentality, made Marian's lot much easier. Insensibly she too turned a little, and their occasional evenings together, although not exhilarating, were at least tolerable and friendly.

But for this spirit of understanding, Marian would have been unable to endure her situation of uncertainty. She felt she had lost touch with Nigel, and was restrained

from making any attempt to recover the old pleasure in him by a despairing thought that perhaps it was best for Nigel to drift away from her, and into other relationships. If she had thought them always wise or desirable —she felt,—she would have welcomed them. But she could not do that. At the back of everything, she wanted to be the one woman in his life. It was her dream. She could not yet face any alternative. Some day—yes, but how vaguely distant that day was in her thoughts! She realised that the situation between them could not continue. She knew that there was some change in him. But she knew, from herself, how one may shrink from one beloved, and seemed wholly to have ceased to love, until one day, unexpectedly, the old flame revives and burns suddenly into a conflagration. It was so with herself; it might be so with Nigel. Love never died. It was sometimes clouded, quiescent, diverted elsewhere; but it was inextinguishable. Lovers could never be indifferent. The intimacy, often obscured though it might be by passion and perversity, could not be utterly cancelled. Marian waited, trusting Nigel.

ii

She heard nothing of his enlistment; so she believed he had not enlisted. If he had done so he would in any case have come to tell her. That was quite certain. The knowledge enabled her to avoid the tremors belonging to the dread of his danger. If he had been ill, she thought she would have heard. Marian reassured herself, being very patient, and hoping all the time, with a hope now almost entirely restrained, that he would come again to see her. Only occasionally, when the longing for him was very acute, did she lose self-control, and find such waiting a nervous trial well-nigh insupportable. Each day she stayed indoors waiting for him to come. What

else could she do? She was committed to friendship; she could make no claim upon him; she must suffer and endure.

And Nigel did not come until a week had passed. Finally he came at night, after dinner, when Howard had gone out in the heavily darkened streets. Marian sat alone, reading. Without warning, the door was opened, and Edith said, in an odd, breathless tone, "Mr. Sinclair, ma'am."

Although she had been reading, Marian had not been following the words in her book. She had been making her own story, which was one of memories. At the name, she thought herself dreaming, so deep in reverie had she been; and for a moment she did not look up. When she did so, she started vehemently to her feet, all the blood gone from her cheeks, and her hand at her breast. The Nigel she saw was not the Nigel she knew. He was another man altogether. Her dream was rent suddenly. Nigel was in uniform: he stood erect, but his head was bowed, and his face was of a deathly pallor. Marian stared at him unbelievingly. He was like some terrible spectre from German romance. She could not think it Nigel. A shudder went through her body. Then, controlling herself very tensely, she opened her lips.

"Are you *real?*" she whispered. "I'm not dreaming!"

iii

Nigel came towards her, into the ray of the light.

"Quite real," he said; and tried to smile.

"But you're ill!" She caught his hand. "My dear, why did you do it?"

"Oh, *that* . . ." He motioned to show that she was wrong. "I'm perfectly well, and this stuff hasn't any effect on me. I've simply been trolleying round. I'm

not posted to a unit yet, and I'm still waiting for orders. You didn't get a letter from me?"

Marian shook her head. She was still holding his hand in both of hers, and her agitation had not subsided. She could not speak for a moment.

"Then why are you ill?" She was insistent, her eyes giving him no escape. Their faces were near; he was hers—so entirely readable that she could not doubt her knowledge. A painful chill touched her heart, for she read ever more and more, a lesson that her self refused to accept. She read that he did not love her at all. It was a terrible realisation. All her penetration was at work, sting-like in its sharpness. He did not love her. More than that . . .

"I'm not ill," said Nigel. "It must be the light. I'm dazed by it. The streets are so dark. It's very bright in here."

Marian hushed him.

"Nigel, my dear . . . It's no good saying that. You've come from somewhere. You're in some distress. Do you think I can't understand and sympathise? Why . . ." She grew suddenly full of arrogance that swept into defiant pride. "Why, you've only to tell me, and the pain will grow less."

Nigel said something that she could not hear. It was "No, no"—the merest murmur of refusal. Their hands dropped apart; but only for a moment, for they were too close together not to make some contact inevitable in this instant of stress. Nigel began to speak, while Marian, anguished but happy in his proximity, listened, her face the inscrutable face of the mother and wife and lover.

"I'd really made up my mind when I was here last. I didn't want to blurt it out too definitely, in case it should be a terrible shock to you."

"Yet you come now in uniform!" whispered Marian,

marvelling at the ways of the young, who thus so magnificently commend themselves for an instance of ancient thoughtfulness.

"But I'd decided. That was finished, d'you see. I wanted you to approve."

"You thought I could do that?"

"You know how much your approval means to me. You've been so wonderfully kind. But I wrote to you when I'd actually done the thing. It's strange you haven't had the letter. Are you sure it didn't come?"

"Quite sure." Marian was still seeing right past this talk, down into his true self, with arch, motherly eyes that were full of grief.

"I've only been in uniform a couple of days. I'm at large until I get a telegram. Then I go to some camp, I suppose; and just learn to be a soldier . . ."

Marian waited long after his voice had dwindled into silence.

"Yes," she said, slowly. "That's not really what you want to tell me, is it?"

iv

"No," said Nigel. "I'm not going to tell you anything more."

"You're making me seem importunate. D'you think I'm not interested, or trustworthy? D'you think I'm inquisitive? I only want to know what is hurting you, because I'm your friend; and what hurts you also hurts me. You believe that?"

"Yes," Nigel agreed. "I believe that. I trust you altogether, Marian."

He left her side, his hands jerked out from his body, and his head back. The white face gleamed in the brightness of the room, and his teeth glistened.

"Why is it," he went on, "that one trusts and trusts

some people, and loves them; and that one isn't sure of others, and loves them also?"

"And loves them . . . more?" asked Marian, in a thrilling voice. She too was at her full height, but with her face in shadow, thankfully. She watched him as he stood unconscious in the light, so that the painful droop of his lips was unhidden. Nigel turned at that, his cheeks flushing.

"More?" he asked. "How can I tell? I'm so puzzled, so . . . Marian, I don't know what to say, or to think. I'm absolutely at a loss, so that I feel like some callow boy who hasn't got his bearings right. I nearly asked you something I'd no right to do."

"You might have asked me anything," said Marian.

"It's for you to answer or not? Yes." He flushed very deeply. "You see, I couldn't. I know I couldn't. It's a point of taste. The reason I'm so bewildered is that—well, when somebody has made a thing seem clear, and then it's suddenly dark . . ."

Marian smiled at his allusiveness.

"You'll have to be more explicit than that," she said. "If you want me to understand."

Nigel stopped short, looked at her and turned on his heel.

"You're laughing at me," he cried.

"No. Only at myself," Marian said, very gravely. "Tell me straight out. Why can't you tell me?"

He hesitated, then stammered a little before speaking.

"You see, it's rather difficult. I feel embarrassed."

"Because you're talking to me—to a woman—to anybody?"

"To you. Marian . . . I thought she was fond of me. I asked her to-night to marry me. She won't. It's been a shock."

Marian stood quite still, frozen; although she had from

the first known what he would say. Then, from between lips that were stiff and painful simply because she could not otherwise keep her voice steady, she asked:

"But do I know who 'she' is?"

Nigel started in surprise. She saw his jaw drop.

"Don't you?" he asked. "Why, it's Cherry."

V

Marian trembled. But she went ruthlessly on.

"What made you think I knew? What made you think she loved you?"

"I thought you knew because you asked me about her the other day. I thought she loved me . . . well, how can one analyse it? Is it such colossal vanity?"

"None, of course." Marian's nostrils were pinched. How dare Cherry refuse him! "All the same, I didn't know." She could not see him for the darkness that was about her spirit. She was cloaked in it. She was choking. Out of the darkness she heard Nigel protest:

"You're cold to me now. You're not sympathetic. You said you were sympathetic."

"You're too sensitive, Nigel," she said very drily, with a sort of contempt. "I'm not cold to you. I'm sorry for your unhappiness; but you don't *know* Cherry, or understand her. You don't trust her . . ."

"I do trust her." His voice was sharply passionate, so that she knew how deep his wound was. "At least," Nigel hesitated. "I did. Now I don't understand her."

"That's probably just what she wants," said Marian, cruelly. "What she's planned. You must remember that a young girl's vanity is her only guide. Is she sure of you?"

"In what sense?"

"Can you give her up?"

Nigel stood for some time in thought.

"I don't know," he said.

"Well then, you must try again."

"I'm going away. I may never come back to London. Or if I do it may be for forty-eight hours only. It's over. I've lost her. She's not mine. No, Marian; it's no good. And yet it makes all the difference in the world to me."

"Marian nodded. How odd that she should still be cool, when she loved him so much, and when she had all this while believed him to be as ardently her lover! How odd! And she could hear this, and speak of his love for Cherry, without screaming. No wonder they all supposed her inhuman! Then she sat down in her chair, just as Howard came into the room, returned from his constitutional in the black streets.

"Hullo, Sinclair!" he said. "So you're in uniform."

"You see me," harshly replied Nigel.

The two men stood contrasted before Marian. They were wholly different. The one she loved, the one she knew and did not love. It was Howard who glanced uneasily sideways for her approval. Nigel was absorbed in his own trouble, conscious only of an affronting question, and of his pain and humiliation. And for the first time the hostility between them was palpably Nigel's. How much had Nigel seen at Hippeswell between Howard and Cherry? That was another insoluble problem for her tired brain.

Marian sank back in her chair, exhausted. She was almost fainting. The room and the scene receded; the men's voices were an indistinct hum. She closed her eyes. Whatever happened, she must appear unmoved, imperturbable. What must she do? And Cherry? Something, it was clear, lay before her, if it were only more suffering than she had already endured. Once

more Cherry was an enigma which Marian alone could penetrate.

vi

For a time Marian continued in this languorous stupor, lost to all but the faintest sense of her surroundings. At first it seemed to her that death—quick, silent death—was the only possible end to her pain, and in that thought she found understanding of those who, reaching an apparently inextricable tangle in the skein of life, choose desperately to destroy themselves. Then, it was not death, but numbness, safe retreat, that Marian needed. She could bear no more. She shrank from life. Her spirit was no longer staunch, but feeble and corrupt through the strain to which it had been subjected. She was ill and hopeless, kept conscious by sheer incessant effort of will. Her head was burning. Pride alone supported her.

Until the parting with Nigel came she remained in this lethargic and despairing state of suspended animation. Then, disregarding Howard, she said earnestly: "Nigel, I'll write to you. I may be able to suggest something. Give me your address. Write it down." He did so, and she had to turn aside because his lowered head aroused such physical longing to press it in consolation and farewell to her breast. As she took the paper she glanced at it, and added, composedly: "Oh, quite near. So much the better."

They shook hands, and Nigel went. Howard, on returning to the room, picked up the paper upon which the address had been written, and read it. He made no comment, but shot a shrewd glance at Marian. She, turned sick and trembling, had her hand upon the mantelpiece, steadying herself. She had borne too much. The effort to be calm to the last had been too exacting. A

deadly sickness came upon her, and the room rose and fell in dreadful waves before her eyes. Long, long waves of emptiness and horror.

At last she could stand no more. Still struggling to appear ordinary and unmoved, she said, as distinctly as her tongue would allow:

"Howard, I wonder if you could get me a glass of water. I'm afraid I'm going to faint. Silly of me."

Even as she spoke, Marian felt her knees lurch. All before her became a mist. Thereafter she knew nothing until she found herself lying upon her bed, feebly and reassuringly smiling, with Howard's arm still under her shoulders, and his face very close to her own.

CHAPTER IX: CONFESSION

i

THE next morning, Howard came into Marian's room before she was up, and her heart softened at the sight of his great red face, with its expression of anxious care. He was evidently much perturbed at the state of her health, and was very serious.

"How are you this morning, old girl?" he asked, patting her hand with his big fingers. "Better? Anything you'd like?"

"Quite well to-day, thank you." She smiled cheeringly at him, not realising that her cheeks were almost as white as the pillow-slip.

"Nothing you want? I shouldn't get up."

"I shall rest a little; but I'm really all right again."

"You don't look it," said Howard, bluntly. He sat on the side of the bed. "Have you been feeling rocky? I noticed the other day you weren't quite up to the mark." He began to dig his heels into the rug beside her bed. "I say, is London a bit too much for you? Would you like to get away? Or go home?"

It was Marian's turn to pat his hand. Howard's awkward gentleness was very genuine, and rather beautiful in its humility. She could not fail to be touched and responsive.

"It's jolly of you," she exclaimed. "I hadn't thought about it. Wouldn't it be a nuisance to you? I mean, what would you do?"

"I should like to come back with you. If you go to

Hippeswell. And come up during the week. Just as in summer-time. It's perfectly easy to manage."

"You want to go back? We've just come to London. It's not a fortnight."

"I want you to be well. And the circumstances are unusual. The only trouble is . . . well, we won't go into that. It's a war consideration."

"Better tell me," she urged. Howard reflected.

"Yes, you're not a fool," he admitted. "I don't believe it; but scaremongers are talking about the possibility of invasion. That would be on the East Coast. We might suddenly have to cut and run. I don't think there's real danger of it. Lots of reasons."

"I'd rather be there," Marian said.

"Then we'll go. Tell Edith. She won't like giving up and going back to work under Blanche. She likes being parlourmaid-in-chief." He was talking quite lightly, in spite of his solemn face. "I'm glad you feel like going."

"Give me another week," begged Marian.

Howard grew uneasy. She saw a curious expression gather. Then he shrugged and stood upright. Turning quickly he bobbed his head. She felt his moustache brushing her face, and his lips upon her cheek.

"All right," he said, rather awkwardly, and with reddening cheeks from the premeditated bob. "You shall decide."

Then he left Marian, who still smiled rather ruefully at the caress. She pressed her hands together, so that her knuckles hurt.

"Oh, Nigel, Nigel!" she whispered. "How could you!" It was her first reproach. Then, as her thoughts went on, she framed words: "You couldn't keep him. You're too old. A woman can't keep a young man's love." Passionately, she rebelled. "Why, he doesn't

know Cherry. He *can't* know her. He's charmed by her bad traits. She's too selfish to make a good wife. She loves herself first . . . always herself first. Ah, but she's a good girl. Is she?"

Always that final doubt destroyed her belief. Always it threw her back into the horror which she had felt at Nigel's change towards herself. Marian could not be anything but bitter. Her justice to Cherry was wilful and deliberate justice, not the natural outpouring of love that was trust. She knew that Nigel's was tantalised love, love of youth for youth, feverish, perverse. It was nature; just as her own love was nature. It was inexplicable—merely the magnetic attraction of two bodies; not at all the harmony of two temperaments. Not love as she knew it; not the instinct of common sacrifice. She was too tired to explore the truth. If this that she thought were not true, it must lie unchallenged, and for all three misery must be the sequel in the kaledioscope of love.

ii

Marian's brain kept coming round to one point—that she had some duty to perform. Her whole nature rebelled against the thought of any duty; but, as though her brain were truly the voice of a deeper instinct than the rebellious, she could not escape from a sense of duty to both Nigel and Cherry. It may have been the impulse to give Nigel his desire, or to learn the truth, or to create understanding where the easy path lay in the inaction which would produce chaos. But she was resolved, while yet she lay in the silence of her bedroom, to see Cherry and to learn what might be done. Why had Cherry refused to listen to Nigel? Was she, after all, a mere coquette? Was she that modern girl who seeks to carry playtime through the whole of life?

Before lunch Marian rose and dressed, still rather weak, but once again clear-headed and resolute. She no longer thought of her own agony. An irresistible hunger drove her out-of-doors, and to the Mants' home. At first she was physically so feeble that she could not walk at more than a slow pace; but presently, as she went forward in the October sunshine, she grew stronger and more cheerful, so powerful is the effect of a clear day and a fresh wind. For one thing she was going back to Hippeswell: for another she was quite definitely doing something which made her feel at peace with herself. Happiness, said the ancient philosopher, is a state of the activity of the soul, conformably with virtue.

iii

When she arrived at the Mants' house at Chelsea she was recognised by the maid who opened the door, and who smiled shyly in welcome.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Mant's just gone out, ma'am. But Miss Cherry's in."

"It's Miss Cherry I want to see," explained Marian.

It was thus that she was enabled to await Cherry and, with a quickly beating heart, to rise as she heard the door open. Cherry came slowly and dejectedly into the room, closing the door and coming coldly to greet her friend. There were no words spoken at all. Cherry, it was clear, remembered only the painful part of their last meeting; Marian was intent upon understanding the reasons of Cherry's refusal of Nigel.

"Mother's out," at last said Cherry, in a low voice.

"I know. I came to see you."

"You shouldn't have done that." It was sad rather than ungracious.

"I had a reason."

Cherry drew up a chair for her visitor, and sat rather

timidly upon the edge of another. She was constrained, as one who dreads what is to come.

"I feel this is such an ugly room for you to come to," she answered. "I'm ashamed for you to see it, when your own rooms are so nice."

"I don't like mine. Only my own rooms at Hippeswell."

"They're lovely. I looked into your bedroom one day. It's beautiful."

"Didn't I show you over the house? You must see it next time you come."

"To Hippeswell? I shall never come again."

"Yes. I'm going back there next week."

"Hippeswell? You're leaving London?" Cherry was aghast. Uncontrollably, she continued, amazed at her own speech: "Oh, *what* shall I do without you?" Tears were in her voice.

"Come to Hippeswell with me," Marian said, in her turn amazed at a folly. Cherry stared at her. There was an astounded silence. Then Cherry exclaimed:

"I don't understand you, Marian. I don't know you. I *can't* come to Hippeswell. Surely you see that. It's unthinkable. We can't go on . . . knowing each other. Oh, I've quite decided that!"

"But you wondered what you'd do if I went away, Cherry!"

"Did I?" Cherry was listless. She shrugged her shoulders with unhappy indifference.

"Perhaps you'd better not come. And yet, if you're unhappy, I'd like to have you there, so that you could be cheered up."

"Who says I'm unhappy?" demanded Cherry, in a rough voice. "I'm quite happy."

"You're not happy. You'd be happy at Hippeswell."

"With you? Oh no!" Cherry shook her head in

defiance. "It's absurd." Marian continued to look at her. She saw the little brilliantly birdlike flight of Cherry's eyes as they tried in vain to meet that glance. "Please . . . please don't look at me," Cherry gasped. "I'm . . ." She recovered herself, with extraordinary self-control. Marian was moved to something more than pity—to admiration.

"Why shouldn't I help you?" she sharply asked. "I want to help you so much."

"You wouldn't. If you knew," murmured Cherry, her head down. Marian tried again, persuasively. She knew that with Cherry, as with other sensitive people, sternness failed, but kindness was always a passport to their own honesty.

"Supposing I know already," she said. Cherry started. Then she was cold again, cold and deliberate, with a chill that might have deceived a man.

"*What* do you know?" she demanded. Marian saw the blue eyes quite hard.

"Do you want help, and happiness?" she asked.

Cherry's eyelashes flickered again. They hid her eyes. She was deeply moved.

"I suppose I do," she whispered. "I'm human enough for that."

"Cherry, are you in love with Nigel? It's horrid of me to ask; but I must know." Marian's voice was trembling. "Forgive me."

A quick, an electric glance came from eyes that were no longer hard.

"No," said Cherry.

Marian waited an instant. At last she replied.

"I don't believe you," she retorted. "I know you better than to believe you."

iv

Cherry tried in vain to hide her relief. A slow crimson came into her cheeks and spread to her brow and neck. Her hands fluttered together.

"You don't know me at all," she said in a low voice. Marian said nothing in reply. The pause lasted a perceptible space. Twice Cherry was about to add something. Marian could actually see the child's nervous play of expression as the thoughts flew like will-o'-the-wisps in her mind. The silence became distressing. Marian could not have borne it an instant longer, when Cherry, breathlessly, made her counter-charge. "I think you're in love with him yourself," she cried.

Marian took a deep breath, her face haggard.

"Is that why you refused him?" she asked, suddenly gentle. There was at first only a stubborn compression of the lips which made Cherry look vicious and obstinate. "Is it?" persisted Marian. She caught the faintest possible sign of assent. It was nothing; it was gone in a flash; but it sufficed. She again breathed deeply, thankful that her intuition had been justified. "You don't think I asked out of curiosity, Cherry . . . Of course any idea that I'm in love with Nigel is ridiculous. Women of my age don't fall quickly in love. Why, he's a dozen years younger than I am. How absurd. I like him very much. We're friends . . ."

"He was in love with you," stabbed Cherry, pale again.

"My dear, don't make yourself unhappy with such a notion."

"D'you think I didn't see you play tennis together, and walk together?" D'you think I couldn't understand the way you talked about him when we were alone together?" It was still a defiance that was offered. Cherry was brimming with scorn at a falsehood.

"I must have been terribly indiscreet," murmured Marian.

"Why, you first taught me to see how . . ." began Cherry and stopped at her indiscretion.

"How wonderful he was?" Marian supplemented. "I'm . . . I'm so glad to have done that. Then, plunging into a lie that was almost voluptuous in its magnitude, she continued. "I wish you could imagine how happy I should be at your wedding."

Again Cherry started, and reddened.

"You won't be at my wedding. It's quite out of the question. I couldn't marry him. I don't really care for him. It's over. We've quarrelled."

"You're hurting Nigel."

Cherry turned in sudden fury.

"Did he *send* you?" Instantly she cried: "Oh, I beg your pardon, Marian."

"I found out. He didn't come to me to blurt out the story. I told him to try again." She could see the throbbing of Cherry's breast. "I think he's got rather a simple nature, Cherry. I think you have to play very straight all the time with him."

Marian rose then, and adjusted her cloak, which she had not removed, but which had slipped down behind her. Cherry also rose; but her face had clouded again to sullen self-disguise. Marian peeped to see if there lurked another emotion; but as she did not observe it she kissed the cold cheek and went quickly out into the street again, and back to the flat. As far as she was concerned she had learnt the one essential fact—that Cherry's action had been due to loyalty to herself. Her heart sank to even greater sadness, because her further duty was plain.

CHAPTER X: THE ERRAND

i

WHEN Marian left Cherry she had formed no definite plan; but walked back to Sloane Street with a determination still vague. Now that she had learned the truth she was disposed a little to embroider upon it. Cherry was in love; and she had denied her love in the first beautiful unselfishness that she had ever known. It was a loyalty to her affection to Marian. That, whatever the consequence, gave her immediately a claim upon Marian's generosity. It was a key to everything. Marian's jealousy was disarmed. One could not fight a friend. Cherry also had seen that. But Cherry, being young, could not pursue a gallant lie to the end. Marian could. Wanton unselfishness, the relinquishment of a thing as so much sacrifice for its own sake, seemed to her to be a disgusting morbidity. But to secure happiness for another, she would forego any satisfaction in life. It was not merely a creed; it was an instinct.

So during the afternoon Marian wondered what she could do. She was resolved upon one thing. She would stand back; but first she would bring these lovers to a clear issue. If they loved each other, they must risk the conflicting foibles incident to their youth and temperament. They must make their own lives, however difficult the task might be. When she thought of both, so wilful, so high-spirited, Marian doubted the permanence of their love. It was a risk. Well, it was always a risk. Lovers grew together; each came to learn the secrets of the other's nature and to conform with ease to the

other's way unconsciously, and merely as a result of the common association. Cherry and Nigel would grow no otherwise. They would learn, perhaps, and quarrel, and part and return; but if they had courage they would never forsake one another.

During the time that she so soberly considered the prospects of the lovers, Marian forgot herself. She was enjoying the delights of planning the lives of those she loved, and seeing them in pleasant places, happy and beloved. She was not doing this ecstatically, or fatalistically, but was knowing that a marriage is very much what husband and wife determine to make it, neither a paralysis nor an emancipation, but a comradeship and an incessant conflict of will and temperament. She was not the average woman, fanatical for a mating; she desired the true happiness (which lay in increasing life and understanding) of the two people whom she loved, as she now recognised, better than any others in the world.

ii

At first Marian thought to write a note to Nigel; but when she came to write it she found the task difficult. At least she must not risk the suspicion of interference, she must not make Cherry seem too easy. If there had been more time, and if Nigel had not been liable for service, she would have done nothing. Or she would have invited them both to dinner. She could still do that, perhaps. No: it would look too planned. Both were tender, capricious . . . The vanity of both was so rampant, that any suggestion of plan would possibly drive them apart. They might drift, lose touch and interest, become fearful. Above all, Cherry might think too much. When a woman thinks too much before marriage, she may ruin her life's happiness. Thought is for later years.

So Marian must act otherwise. She must write to Nigel, or see him. She tried again to compose a letter which should urge him to see Cherry again, and repeat his proposal. But in a letter she could not invent any reason for this course. She could only say, bluntly, that Cherry loved him; and that would be an offence. She could not betray Cherry's confidence, even in such an emergency. It would not do. There remained, therefore, only one course. She must see Nigel. She would write asking him to come and see her. That, she thought, in a melancholy way, could not now be misconstrued. It was not as her lover that he would come. What a fool she had been to suppose it ever possible. The memory that he had kissed her at Hippeswell scorched Marian. The memory that she had wanted his kisses. The knowledge that she still coveted them; that only pride would make her now inexorably refuse them.

She took a pen and paper, and wrote the note to Nigel. Then she put it into the bureau. She had been so long in thinking over her plan that it was time to dress for dinner. While she was dressing, a telegram arrived from Howard. It said "Not home to dinner." As she crumpled the flimsy paper, Marian had an inspiration. What if Nigel also had received a telegram? What if her message arrived too late? Nigel would go, in despair; he would not see Cherry; the happiness of both would be interrupted, and a crystallisation averted. A terrible temptation seized her. If this marriage were stopped! If Nigel, despairing of Cherry, turned again to her, as he might do! She saw a precarious happiness snatched from disaster. Closing her eyes she could glimpse a future of hurried meetings, of untranquil love. Her body was shaken with a sudden passion, and a knowledge of what might ensue.

What restrained her? Men were caught so. It was

the easiest thing. Disappointed, they responded to the ugly cajolery of the women who loved them with such sick craving as hers. There followed—what? A kind of wanton passion, a kind of satisfaction that was no satisfaction. Gratification that was only tantalising. Marian shuddered deeply. She was tempted and self-scornful. Say she could have Nigel—upon what terms would it be? Always the knowledge that she was not his true love. Always her thought, her longing, for him; and his heart never hers. No: she could not bear it. Better far that she should irrevocably lose him than that she should have this hot late summer of passion, with its stale sequel of unwanted pursuit. She would become a base creature, perpetually offering love that had grown tiresome and disgusting. The storm had shaken her; and she stood upright against its further onslaught. Nigel must marry Cherry. It was better. Oh, far better.

She knew at last what to do. She would go, after dinner, to see Nigel. In that way she would be sure of finding him and of putting an end to her temptation.

iii

At night Marian again set out into the dark streets, so feebly lighted that she could not at first pursue a straight course. There was a high wind, and a few drops of rain scattered occasionally about her. In leaving the house it seemed to her once that she heard her name called; but the wind was so strong, and her state of mind such, that she supposed it to be an illusion due to her overwrought nerves. She did not turn, but walked very swiftly onward, towards Nigel's flat. Once she lost her way in the turnings of the streets, but presently, reviving her knowledge of the address by a glance at the paper which lay within her corsage, went on again, intent upon her errand. She heard a clock strike nine, and she hur-

ried faster. The rain began to patter upon the pavements; the wind dropped a little, and came in great gusts.

At first, when she reached Nigel's flat, Marian feared that he must be out, for it was all in darkness; but at her ring a light flashed, and his shadow immediately appeared. Rain-spattered, she must have struck Nigel as a remarkable figure, standing there in his doorway. For a moment he did not recognise her.

"Marian!" he cried. "Why, you're wet. Come in!"

She found herself in a large, barely-furnished room. A fire was burning, and there were many scraps of charred paper in the fireplace, some of them still smouldering. A portmanteau, half-filled, lay upon the floor, at a couple of yards' distance. A few books were near it. The room had a dismantled air.

"You're going," Marian said, suddenly pale at the knowledge. "I'm too late."

"To-morrow. To-morrow morning early." He was distrait, rather embarrassed at her intrusion.

"Listen, then. Nigel, you must go at once and see Cherry, d'you see? As soon as I've gone. You must see her before you go away."

Nigel shook his head. "I don't want to see her," he said, distinctly. "I can't plead."

Marian's head jerked in impatience at this stubbornness. She was quite equally determined, and with more wisdom than he.

"You must *not* spoil your opportunity by this impatient pride," she urged. "You're in love with her; and yet you won't take the trouble to win her. Oh, I know what I'm talking about, Nigel. Believe me. Cherry has to be won."

"She's refused me," he said, impatiently.

"You're bent on war with her?" asked Marian. "In other people you'd see how stupid that attitude is. You'd

be the first to say that if they want a thing they must be ready to be patient for it." He tried to speak. "Wait till I've said this, Nigel. Think of Cherry as a girl as high-mettled as yourself. You do her an injustice. You think that because you've been rebuffed the whole thing is over. It's never over. Nothing is ever over while there's determination and good will. D'you see how wars occur? They come, if there's no plot, because irresponsible people lose their tempers and refuse accommodation. When one's young, one says—'Do what I want, or I'll break you, or break with you.' You're not as young as that, you know."

"She's refused me."

"Well?" Marian's eyes glowed. "What woman wouldn't?"

Nigel started. Something which he held in his hand—a paper, or a letter—dropped upon the floor.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"It's an instinct to refuse. It's a fear, a dread. The finer the character, the greater the sense of risk. D'you suppose a girl as fine as Cherry is waiting to drop into your mouth? How arrogant you are! How arrogant!" She was bitterly angry, and yet had not lost her temper. His obstinacy had roused all her chagrin.

"But you . . ." he stammered. "You're not like that."

"Of course I am," she indignantly cried. "I'm unscrupulous. I'd lie to the last if my impulse bade me to do so. Can't you realise that Cherry's a high-strung creature, not mad to get married; but a real girl, a human being like yourself, with all *your* arrogance, and something more of her own? A secret creature that you'll never grasp all your life?"

Nigel stared at her stupidly.

"You terrify me," he said.

"Why? Are you a fraid of marrying an equal?"

"Certainly not." He was as angry as she.

"Very well. Go straight to Cherry and plead with her. Humble yourself. Let her see that it's not *you* who stoop . . ."

"Marian!"

"When a man asks a girl to marry him, and rides off at her refusal, it's because he loves himself, and his own pride—his own vanity, if you like—better than the girl. You love yourself more than you love Cherry. Poor Cherry!"

"Marian. That's not true. What of poor Nigel? Am I to efface myself?"

"If she loves you she'll meet you exactly half-way."

"She's refused me. This isn't simply a quarrel. It's a break."

"And so you're both unhappy. You've asked her to give you everything; and you're marking out the limit of your own concessions. Nigel, I've no patience with you. I beg you to go now, *now,* to Cherry. You can do no harm. And afterwards you'll have no self-reproach."

Nigel stood irresolute. Marian went swiftly to him, and, putting her hand upon his elbow, kissed his cheek. Deeply flushing, he pressed her hand, and raised it to his lips. Then his eye went straight to the wall, against which hung his new cap and overcoat.

'Shall I?" he asked. Marian regarded him with a perfectly sphinx-like expression. She knew she had won.

It was then that the electric bell whirred.

iv

The newcomer was Howard.

"My wife here?" he demanded. Nigel's cheerful response sounded. Howard plunged forward into the

room, a great big man with an absurd red face of concern. He had come, it seemed, expecting Marian; whose surprised face and smiling welcome pulled him up short.

"Oh, Howard; you shouldn't have troubled!" she cried. "But it's very nice of you."

"Troubled!" stammered Howard, darkly suspicious. "I'm coming at once."

Nigel put on his cap and overcoat. Howard stretched out an arm.

"I'm taking my wife home," he said.

"Oh, yes; that's quite all right," agreed Nigel, turning back the collar of his coat. "I'm going in the other direction."

Howard stared. Marian, curious to know the object of his visit, was amused to see his bewilderment. What was he thinking about? Why had he come?

In a minute they were all out of the flat, and the Forsters were in Howard's taxi. There were "good nights," and then all was darkness except for the dimmed cab lamps.

"How did you know where to find me?" Marian asked, gaily.

Howard's gruff voice entered into an explanation.

"I saw you come out of the flat . . . I was just arriving. I called you, and came after you; but lost sight of you. My hat blew off. I went back to the flat, found a letter to that chap. Came along."

"But why?"

Howard's reply was extraordinarily illuminating. It made Marian give a sudden despairing shout of laughter, and clutch his arm. As if it needed this to point the irony of everything!

"Because I'm so damned jealous, my dear," said Howard, simply, and very humbly.

CHAPTER XI: CHERRY AND MARIAN

i

IT was after breakfast the next morning, and after Howard had gone to the office, that Cherry came. She had none of the blithe spirits that Marian had expected. Instead, there was an air of constraint that made her almost pathetic. Marian herself was grave, but this morning not unhappy. Indeed, her manner was easier than it had been for some time, because she was at peace with herself.

"Hullo! You *are* early!" she cried, but with a smile that made the greeting without offensiveness. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Hours ago!" exclaimed Cherry, emulating Marian's ease. "Why, the morning's half gone. I thought you might be out—marketing. I'm supposed to be that. I'm out to buy a thimble and a comb."

"Splendid! Have you bought them? We'll buy them together. I want some things. We'll go to Harrods. At a big place they don't mind selling little things. They can't tell whether you're buying big things in the next department or not. I'll get my coat."

Marian was making for the door when Cherry cried out sharply:

"Don't go!"

Marian stopped. The voice had been so pleading. She came back at once, and sat down on a hassock, while Cherry knelt upon the hearthrug and finally sat down

with the flames making firelight upon her cheeks and runnells of gold in her pretty hair.

"Well?" asked Marian.

"Well, you *know*," Cherry answered.

"Nothing!" declared Marian. She endured a quick glance from Cherry that grew into a long one; and her innocence was abundantly assumed.

"I've told Nigel I *will* marry him."

Marian was not quite proof; but she played up with courage.

"Good girl," she said. "So he's gone away happy."

"How did you know?" asked Cherry, sharply. Marian started.

"That he was going away? He met Howard last night." She was praying that Nigel had not been a fool, that he had not told Cherry of their discussion.

"Oh," said Cherry. "I see."

"You don't sound very cheerful. I thought girls who had just promised to marry people were rather jolly as a rule."

Cherry looked down at her knees, outlined by her attitude.

"I *was* cheerful," she explained, in a low voice. "I was first of all very wretched—till you came. Then I was less wretched, and more wretched. And then, at an awful hour last night—for visiting—Nigel came. Marian, he really *was* rather a dear . . ."

Marian felt that the room was stifling. She could only breathe in little jerking sniffs that would have made her laugh at another time. She patted Cherry's hand.

"I'm sure he must have been," she said.

Cherry was almost like a cat, although her body was as firm as it was supple. She gave Marian a searching glance, and Marian, in return, was aware of every faintest motion of Cherry's.

"He *can* be a beast," cried Cherry. "But so can I, if it comes to that. I think that's one thing that makes me like him."

"Quite possibly," agreed Marian, in a dry way.

"Marian, are you glad?" asked Cherry, like a child.

ii

"Awfully glad," said Marian, reassuringly. "I think you're both going to be happy. I *hope* you are. Because you're both . . . well, rather dears."

Cherry shook her head vigorously.

"*I'm* not," she cried. Marian moved impatiently.

"You always say that," she objected. "It's because you don't know the minds of other people. I do."

Cherry continued to look dejected.

"You don't know me," she said. "I know lots of things you don't know. You think of me as a child. I am, in some ways; but I'm an old experienced woman, in others."

"My dear Cherry," retorted Marian, very candidly. "If you suppose I haven't got some shrewd ideas about you, you underrate my intelligence. I don't know all about you. You know almost nothing about yourself. I think there are some things in you that . . . well . . ."

"That are rotten," supplied Cherry.

"That I don't like, at any rate."

"There are things in *you* that *I* don't like," said Cherry. "Your inhumanness, and your quietness . . . your way of making me feel a beastly little pig."

Marian gave a quite audible sigh.

"Horrid little egotist," she murmured.

"I *am*. I know. I'm everything that's horrible . . . But there's something. I'm just Cherry, and that's all you can say."

"I think that would have come better from me," reproved Marian, laughing. They were very friendly now, friendly and intimate; and Cherry's old warm eagerness had returned, and her childish happiness in Marian's company. They had only to be together a little while for Cherry to lose her hard aggressiveness and to show the humility that lay far beneath her superficial self-confidence.

"There's one thing you don't know about me, though," said Cherry, becoming serious. "It's a thing I'm ashamed of, and I want to tell you, because we shall never be right until you know. I should always feel a constraint if I didn't know that you knew; and I think it'll make you feel less nice to me . . ."

"Don't I know everything . . . everything that concerns me?" Marian wearily lowered her head, so that it was within an inch of Cherry's. Straying hairs of both, so similar in colour and beauty, came into contact. Perhaps both Marian and Cherry knew this; but neither moved, or gave any sign of such consciousness.

"It's this," resumed Cherry, very quietly. "When I was . . . at Hippeswell . . ." A flush rose to her cheeks. Her voice sank to a tiny murmur that was hardly more than a whisper. "You were so nice to me, Marian. You hadn't any reason to be. But I never meant to be bad . . . I'm thoughtless and selfish . . . Yes, I *am* bad, though. Only I don't mean to be. But this is when I *meant* to be bad. When I saw you with Nigel, I thought you were in love with him. Your voice was so different . . ."

"How ridiculous!" said Marian, moving uneasily.

"As though you were dreaming. And you spoke about him . . . And then, when he came back to London, I met Nigel at a dinner-party; and he sat next to me. And I couldn't think of anything to talk to him about

except you. And I led him on to talk about you, and got more and more jealous of you, because you were so splendid and I was so . . . ugly and full of base thoughts and wishes to do base things . . . I felt that he oughtn't to talk about you like that to another woman. As though you were perfect. I felt you had everything, just because you were cold and self-contained . . ."

"Cold!" whispered Marian. "Oh my dear Cherry!"

"You *are*, you know," persisted Cherry. "So I felt very irritated and jealous and mischievous. Horrible! And I . . . made up my mind that I'd . . ." She could no longer speak. Her voice was trembling. Her eyes were full of tears. She dabbed them with her handkerchief, very seriously, like a child, and blew her nose. "You see what a beast I am," she articulated at last. Marian waited.

"Go on," she said. "You made up your mind . . ."

"I said we'd meet, and I played with him, and he was rather charmed, and I did it all for jealousy of you, meaning to play a trick on you. I didn't mean to take him away from you altogether. You mustn't believe that of me, Marian. But just to play with him. And then I found out one day that I hated you; and I knew that that meant I'd gone too far and . . . Every time I saw you I had the feeling that I was being punished for being treacherous to you. I haven't had a good conscience all the time. I meant to tell you the first time I saw you; and Howard came in, and I've gone on letting you love me all the time because I couldn't bear you to understand what a mean thing I was. And I tried to send Nigel away because I couldn't feel I had any right to be loved by him and to love him. And now if you want never to see me again I'll go . . . Oh, but Marian, I can't bear you to hate me; because I'm only a beastly little girl, and I . . ."

Cherry began to cry, strained against Marian's breast, and Marian's lips pressed to her hair.

iii

The fit of crying was very short, but they did not speak for a long time. It had been a relief to both of them; for in this demand for her love Marian found concealment for her own suffering. There seemed nothing to be said, upon either side; and yet she must speak, because to be silent would be to leave Cherry with a sense of having given a secret unrepaid.

"Cherry," she began at last, "I will never send you away. I told you I couldn't do that. It's so strange that I've had cruel thoughts about you, and hostilities, too. I think I've been jealous of you, as you've been of me; only a different kind. You see, being older, I go through different things. Or they seem different. And I don't think either of us is very well able to speak freely. The people who can speak freely don't feel very much perhaps. I don't know. Only I'm not old. I suffer terribly, sometimes; and because nobody knows or suspects what is going on in my heart I think I suffer more than ever. When you say I'm cold I just feel you don't understand me, and that makes me so awfully unwilling to judge you. I don't judge you. I think of you as like myself, trying very hard to do what seems to you to be right and wise and good, but never quite sure what is best to be done, and often being led into folly by all sorts of impulses that are unaccountable. It's so hard to do what's wise, even if one wants to. And what makes things hard for both of us is that we both think, and thought brings unhappiness as well as tranquillity. You're young, and you do things that are natural, and sometimes silly, and sometimes thoughtlessly cruel; and yet when you think at all, or are made to suffer for what

you've done, your brains make you see everything very clearly, and you get the idea that you're wicked. When if you could know what other people think and do, and how they cheat themselves in all sorts of ways, you'd feel differently. It's all because you're young and because you're very self-engrossed, so that you're always thinking *about* yourself, and *for* yourself, and not sufficiently realising that everything you do has its effect on others. Everything you do. It has its effect on me, of course, and yourself; but on others as well, even on those who aren't born yet. And I shall presently be an old woman, and old women, unless they're very busy or contented, have terrible opportunities for thinking and remembering . . .

"When you're married you'll find that every impulse of yours may pull against the impulse of Nigel's, and if you insist upon going your way you'll both be very unhappy, because that will harden him and make him cruel in return. So marriage will be very difficult for you, and it's only if you try hard to be considerate, and find your happiness in Nigel's happiness, that the marriage will succeed. You see I'm being a wiseacre, and I hate to be that; but when I think of all you may grow to be I feel an extraordinary sense of responsibility to you."

"Why should you?" asked Cherry, in a whisper.

"It isn't because I feel superior to you. It's simply that being outside you I see the dangers you run in being so pretty, and thoughtless, and rather selfish. And I see how increasingly you'll suffer for being those things through being able to think clearly, and unable to trust others. You still can't bear reproof, because it offends you; and you're sensitive even about anything I may say, although you know I love you and believe in your power to be a noble woman."

"But you *do* believe in me?" said Cherry. It was only half a question. For the rest, it was a confident assumption. Already Cherry's mind had gone back to herself, to the sense that she was invincibly Cherry. She was not yet able to appreciate Marian disinterestedly as a noble woman; but must forever institute a comparison between them and feel humiliated at her own temperamental failures. No speech of Marian's—however much it might bring truth into Cherry's comprehension—would effect an essential change in her nature.

Marian, unconscious of any need for comparison, since she knew herself to be as imperfect as Cherry, sat looking at the fire, with Cherry's head against her shoulder. The day outside darkened as great storm-clouds covered the sky. The room was in a grey half-light well suited to the mood of these two who sought to plumb the depths of their sympathy and their dissonance. Marian was now very composed and resolute, and entirely mistress of herself, as she had always been and as she always would be. She was able to feel sympathy and understanding because she had the power to give inexhaustibly; but her reward thenceforward was to lie in the love and trust of her fellows rather than in any satisfaction of her own passion for happy experience. If Marian could have prayed for a gift, she would have demanded joy in her life. Instead, nature had given her as compensation the strength and courage to endure her own pain and the ability to imagine and soften the distress of others. If it is not the first of gifts it is among those most rarely bestowed upon poor mortals, and is without price.

THE END

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